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# The Burden of Prophecy

edited by Neil McIlwraith

Studies in Prophecy No.1

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Dedicated to the memory of  
COLIN WINTER (1928-81)  
and to those struggles for justice  
for which he lived and died

When looking for contributors to this volume, we wrote first of all to Colin Winter. Very quickly came the reply, "Thank you for your invitation to do something on Prophecy. I gladly accept. The theme is a splendid one - all strength to SCM in pursuing it." Despite very poor health, he completed the essay just before returning to hospital, where he was to die in November. The enthusiasm with which he took up that task of writing is testimony to Colin Winter's strength and courage. His commitment is captured in a short prayer he wrote:

*Lord,  
remind me when  
I need to know,  
you did not  
ask me to  
defend your  
Church  
but to lay  
down my life  
for people*



## Notes on CONTRIBUTORS

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Colin Winter was the Bishop of Namibia from 1968 to 1972, and remained as Bishop when he was forced into exile. He founded the Namibia International Peace Centre, now based in East London. He toured many countries, publicising the struggle of the Namibian people, and campaigning for justice throughout the world. He was the author of *'Just People'*, *'For George and John'*, *'Namibia'* and *'The Breaking Process'*.

Neil McIlwraith is SCM's Director of Resources, Secretary of the National Student Christian Congress, and a part-time research student in the theological understanding of the State at St. Andrews University.



## PREFACE

'*The Burden of Prophecy*' is the first in a series of '*Studies in Prophecy*'. It is intended as a general introduction to the concept of prophecy. Later studies will deal with specific aspects of contemporary life in the light of our search for a prophetic discipleship.

'*Studies in Prophecy*' are designed to accompany and aid the thinking of local groups who are wrestling with the SCM study theme of 'Prophecy' in 1982-3. One of the aims of the theme is to break down the division between students of different academic disciplines, and the division between the 'professionally religious' and the laity; to encourage the latter to fulfil their neglected potential for theological and prophetic thought.

SCM warmly invites other groups, whether ecumenical or denominational, student or non-student, to take part in the consideration of prophecy.

You are also invited, as individuals or groups, to send us your thoughts on 'Prophecy', whether they be in response to the essays collected here, or in any other way that you feel appropriate. Your contributions will be collected and sent out in a regular newsletter.

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The asterisks in the text after words of specialised usage refer to a glossary at the end of the essay. It is hoped that this will help in some small way to break down the barriers between the vocabularies of different disciplines.

# Neil McIlwraith

## The Burden of Prophecy

Why do we speak of the 'burden' of prophecy? Prophecy is a burden because it is a responsibility laid upon those God calls to speak. In many recorded cases, it is a responsibility which prophets not only have not sought but actively resist. Many of the Old Testament prophets were unsure whether they deserved such responsibility, or were capable of fulfilling God's command. Often, like Jesus, they came from a part of the country or a social milieu where the call to prophesy would be least expected. But they were impelled to it by God. The crucifixion of Jesus was (among other things) the ultimate prophetic sign; and we are clearly shown how Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemani, doubted his ability to live out the word of God to the degree demanded of him. This reluctance of the prophets of the past should serve as a warning to us. We should avoid a romantic view of prophecy. Too often we lightly call upon Christians to put on the prophetic mantle, without any recognition of the costliness of that undertaking.

'Burden' also refers to the meaning, the import, of the prophets' words. As is so often the case, the settling of two apparently disparate concepts on a single word, is an

indication of stored wisdom. For the message of the prophets is a burden not only because of fear in the face of God, the author of the words, but also fear in and for the audience. The prophet is herself part of her own audience, and, however faithful to God's word, is implicated in that people's history; she therefore shares in the harshness of God's judgment and is included in condemnation. Here again is a lesson for aspiring prophets today: prophecy is not the knocking down of distant idols - whether it be the arms race, or monetarism, or communism - but the knocking down of oneself, of one's own world. A true prophet, therefore, will weep for and with her people.

A God who chooses to reveal himself through prophecy is a God whose relationship to the world is thereby revealed as intervention. Prophecy is not just a statement: it is a contestation. It cannot be seen outside the reference of 'dispute'. Prophecy always either intervenes in, or makes explicit, or generates, a dispute. It calls to an amendment (a-mend-ment) of the dispute, but only on the understanding that the dispute must first of all be laid bare and brought to a head before reconciliation can be achieved.

As contestation, it is inseparable from the context in which, and to which, it speaks. Thus it enters into very specific disputes about social practices: Howley, noting only some of the most dominant themes in Old Testament prophecy, lists robbery, violence, oppression of the poor, dishonest trading, luxurious indifference, adultery, law breaking, charging interest on loans and mortgages, and corruption of the courts.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to compare the Biblical conception of prophecy with the Qu'ranic, in which Muhammad the Prophet is understood as the mouthpiece of God, and his own contribution is continually played down. Indeed it is a grave offence in Islam to suggest that Muhammad may have been in any way responsible for the words which appear in the Qu'ran. The opening word of the surah which is usually accepted as the first of God's messages to Muhammad is 'Recite' (Surah 96). Indeed the literal meaning of 'Qu'ran' is 'recitation'. Though equally sure of the prophets' fidelity to God's word, the Bible portrays them with far greater responsibility for analysing the ills of the nation. So we often see, in the Old Testament prophets, a listing of the various wrongs followed by an abrupt intervention: "Therefore thus

says the Lord...". The Word of Yahweh loses none of its significance and authority for having its occasion in the prophets' analysis of particular social practices.

In theology in recent years, there has been much emphasis on the specific social contexts of prophecy - and this should be welcomed. At the same time, we should note that there is also a general social context in which all prophecy arises: *inertia*, by which I mean here, the inability to make an imaginary - and, thence, real qualitative - leap into a new direction. The present - with all its ills - has a concreteness which encourages us to frame all decisions, plans and hopes within its bounds. Jeremiah encapsulates this narrowing of horizons when he says: "*they commit iniquity and are too weary too repent*" (Jer.9:5). The fixity of the present makes a decision to remain within its constraints feel like no decision at all, while any attempt to move beyond it entails a sustained effort of will and imagination.

The Hebrew word which we translate as 'to repent' also meant 'to turn', 'to change direction'. The Old Testament prophets' task was to reawaken the Jews to the possibility - however slight - of charting a new course. The prophets called Israel's attention to its history and reminded them of the promise: both the promise that God had made to them, and their own consequent 'promise', the potential that was invested in them. They then relentlessly compared this promise with the Jews' actual performance. The point of this historical approach was to unblock the stagnation of the present, to show that what was happening had had an alternative, and therefore that the future was not predetermined but open. The aim of the prophet is to disrupt the process whereby the given-ness, the obviousness, of the present is used to colonise the future by those whose interest is in the maintenance of prevailing relationships. Prophecy strives to prevent '*a terrifying closure between possibility and what is.*'<sup>2</sup> It seeks to include under the heading of 'possible' much of what weary humanity would prefer to classify as 'utopian'. "*The injustice, the mercilessness, the oppression, and the exploitation to which all cultures have learned to resign themselves are precisely what Yahweh wants to abolish in the world.*"<sup>3</sup> The prophets' message serves to replace responsibility in human hands. It points out that our present position is not just a matter of chance, but is

the result of all sorts of decisions, hopes and confrontations in the past. The present, like the past, is, and is the result of, human (ir-)responsibility. Having heard the prophetic word, we can no longer plead ignorance of the road on which we are travelling. We are forced to recognise that any irresponsibility we claim for the future is an act of refusal and not of misapprehension.

For the prophets, only a future in which interhuman justice is realised offers any prospect of a reconciliation with God. Justice - and its 'achievability' - is the prophets' central message. *"Whoever is capable of resigning himself to the fact that justice will never be realised is incapable of taking the prophets seriously."*<sup>4</sup> It would make no sense to the Old Testament prophets to ask them whether Israel's failings were political or religious. For them, turning away from God and doing injustice were not separate offences, but rather the same offence seen from different angles. Look for example at this passage from Jeremiah:

*"they proceed from evil to evil,  
and they do not know me, says the Lord.  
Let everyone beware of his neighbour,  
and put no trust in any brother;  
for every brother is a supplanter,  
and every neighbour goes about as a slanderer.  
Everyone deceives his neighbour  
and no one speaks the truth... (Jer.9:3-6)  
Heaping oppression upon oppression  
and deceit upon deceit,  
they refuse to know me, says the Lord."*

A society, therefore, in which relationships are deceitful and unjust is incompatible with an unguarded, honest relationship - a knowledge of - God. And the equation of ignorance of God with injustice is mirrored in the many passages which identify knowledge of God with justice:

*"Your father ate and drank like you,  
but he practised justice and right;  
this is good.  
He defended the cause of the poor and the needy;  
this is good.  
Is not this what it means to know me?  
It is Yahweh who speaks." (Jer.22:16; see also  
Is.51:1; 58:2-3)*

Jesus locates himself in this tradition when he identifies

himself with 'the least of these my brethren'. The prophets go further than identifying knowledge of God with justice: they know God in justice because justice is of the nature of God: *"let him who glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practise steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth"*(Jer.9:24). Some of the prophets' most forthright criticism is directed precisely against those who claim that it is possible to know God apart from justice - through the cult, religious worship. They argued that God refused to recognise worship that took place outside the context of justice.

*"I hate, I despise your feasts,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."  
(Amos 5:21&24; see also Is.1:11-17)*

Once again, the prophets confound the modern distinction between religious and political responsibility. For them, the doing of justice is itself the worship of God. In Isaiah we read:

*"Behold, in the day of your fast, you  
seek your own pleasure.  
Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight,  
and to hit with wicked fist.  
Fasting like yours this day  
will not make your voice to be heard on high...  
Is not this the fast I choose:  
to loose the bonds of wickedness,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free... (Is.58:3,4,6)  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and to bring the homeless poor into your house?"*

Words are an arena of conflict. The prophets are continually embattled in a contestation over human words to fashion them into words of God. We have already seen this process at work over such concepts as 'knowledge of God' and 'worship of God'. Another example would be Israel's 'election' by God. By the time of the prophets, many Jews had chosen to understand 'election' as a good luck charm, guaranteeing Israel's safety, irrespective of its deeds (Amos 9:10). Amos sought to rescue the idea of 'election' from this corruption, by abruptly interrupting the process of false logic which led from 'election' to a life of unconcern:

"You only have I known  
of all the families of the earth  
therefore I will punish you  
for all your iniquities."

(Amos 3:2; see also Is.5:1-7; Jer.8:25-6)

Far from removing obligations, election reinforced them. Sin was the refusal to recognise that there must be a reciprocation of election in terms of human responsibility.

Finally, the battle for the use of the word 'prophecy' is itself a reflection of the prophetic battle. The prophets of the Old Testament continually fought against the false prophets who perverted 'prophecy' by claiming its authority for words which justified injustice or self-interest. Above all, they had to do battle with the cult prophets who sought to routinize and institutionalise prophecy, to make it predictable.

The battle for the use of the word 'prophecy' is one in which Christians have been involved to the present day. Now the greatest danger is not that the institutional church will domesticate prophecy, but that one aspect of prophecy - prediction - will be made to serve for the whole. Prediction, as part of a prophetic message, draws attention to the consequences of our present course of action if left uninterrupted. But prediction in isolation may actually be anti-prophetic, positing certain outcomes as inevitable, irrespective of our action in the interim. Thus it confirms the human being as the passive spectator of history. True prophecy, on the other hand, does not invite an audience to be passive, but addresses them as people capable of transforming themselves and the world; and it sends at least some of them away with the determination to take responsibility for the human future, and to fight for justice in it.

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# Harry Mowvley

## Prophecy in the Old Testament

Today prophets are people who can tell you that the bottom is going to drop out of the stock market in a month's time, or that we shall have a white Christmas or hot July, or that England will win - or not win - the World Cup. Whether or not they are good prophets we have to wait and see. It depends whether their prophecies come true. Unfortunately this understanding of prophecy has greatly influenced common opinions about the Old Testament prophets with disastrous results for a proper appreciation of their significance. People rummage through the prophetic books looking for predictions of the coming of Jesus Christ or, even worse, searching for clues as to what is going to happen to the world at some future date and as to when that day will be.

Now it is true enough that the prophets did predict the future, but by and large, those predictions were broad in scope and lacking in precise detail: God would destroy Israel, Jerusalem would be captured, the Jews would be restored to their homeland, God would provide a new king. Not only were they broad predictions but they were in relatively short perspective. They were expected to happen soon, with-



in the lifetime of those who spoke them and heard them, or their near descendants. Moreover, these views about the future were not due not due to any gift of clairvoyance or to a reading of the stars. They arose from a deep and searching consideration of the relationship between God and his people in their present condition.

Take Amos for instance; he spoke several times of the judgment God would bring upon Israel in the future. He knew this would happen because he was aware of Israel's sins, her rebellious acts against God; but he never said how it would happen. He never once mentioned the Assyrians who did, in fact, destroy Israel some thirty years later. All he could say was, for example, "Prepare to meet your God"(4:12) and that, in all conscience, is a terrible prospect for a people in their condition. Yet how they must meet him Amos did not say. So the prophets did not limit themselves to predicting what would happen; just as importantly they condemned, as vehemently as they were able, the things they saw to be wrong in their society and they judged these against their understanding of the nature of God. This same knowledge of God then enabled some of them, at least, to see beyond divine judgment to restoration.

It should already be clear from all this that we cannot speak of the prophets simply as social commentators. They were, nevertheless, deeply aware of the society around them and of the issues raised in it by greed and pride. They were able to analyse the ills of government and to see the wilful folly of certain courses of action, contemplated or carried through by the king and his advisers on the international stage. They looked, observed, pondered and analysed situations but their message was not derived from this alone.

Rather they saw their words as coming from God himself. "Thus saith the Lord", or better, "This is what the Lord has said", is frequently their claim. They were God's messengers, carrying his message to the people. But how had the Lord said it? They were inspired, but how? There is one form of prophetic saying which gives us a useful clue. It is sometimes known as 'diatribe and threat'. The prophet began by analysing and describing the situation as he saw it. But there then follows the word of divine judgment. In Amos 4:1, Amos reflects upon the deeds of the Israelite women but in verse 2 comes a solemn oath from God



threatening punishment. Isaiah(1:21ff) described what he saw in Jerusalem and followed it with God's threat of divine judgment and then with a further word of promise. So the divine word is given to the prophet in the context of his own penetrating analysis of the evils of society, viewed against his awareness of God.

Even the word of judgment or promise itself is sometimes derived partly from the prophet's own perception. When Hosea said Israel would be overthrown by the Assyrians (10:6) and Jeremiah said the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem(22:24ff) and the prophet in exile said that Cyrus would allow the Jews to go back home(Isaiah 44:28, 45:1ff) they were sufficiently aware of the international situation to be able to recognise who would affect the peoples's future. But they believed that, in the long run, all these things were brought about by Yahweh their God.

On the other hand, Isaiah had no grounds, other than his own understanding of God, for believing that God would eventually send a new ruler for Judah and this new king would be like the great King David(Isaiah 11:1ff). Such a hope was never fulfilled any more than were the hopes in Hosea that the Northern Kingdom of Israel would be restored and renewed(2:14, 11:8). Yet, although these hopes never were fulfilled as the prophets anticipated, they remained open and valid, awaiting fulfilment. Christians now claim that the coming of Jesus Christ has fulfilled them. This is quite different from saying that the prophets predicted his coming.

So the prophets were neither social and international commentators who perceived what was happening in the world and deduced from it certain consequences, nor isolated dreamers waiting in solitude for inspiration. They were men who used their God-given gifts of perception to match the people's actions against their own understanding of God and in this way became receptive to God's word for their hearers.

Sometimes the prophet withdrew into the "Council of God" to hear his word(Jer.23:18, Amos 3:7) but he did not do so with an empty mind but with full awareness of the social, political and religious situation to which he was to speak. On other occasions it was in the everyday world of men carrying baskets of summer fruit(Amos 8:1) or measuring walls with a plumb-line(Amos 7:7) or of worship in the



Temple(Is.6:1ff.) or of boiling pots and almond blossom (Jer.1:11ff) that they realised what they must say to their people, for such objects or events gained from God a significance they could never have imagined for themselves.

It is this intricate intertwining of human perception and divine revelation which makes the Old Testament prophets such remarkable men.

## II

Who were these men who possessed such gifts and powers that their words have been preserved down to the present day? The question is easier to ask than to answer because the books of the Old Testament tell us so little about them. Those who collected their words together into books were much less interested in the men than in their message. Most of our information is therefore incidental. The situation is further complicated by the fact that those same collectors sometimes told stories about the prophets, but told them in such a way as to teach certain truths about prophets and prophecy which they themselves wanted to make known. So they are not strict, straight-forward biographies. They are stories about the prophets, no doubt based upon real incidents in their lives but shaped to serve the purpose of the compilers who were not terribly interested in information about the prophets for its own sake. We have to be careful therefore not to claim too detailed and precise a knowledge about their lives and personal circumstances. Having said that, we can say some things and it becomes clear that they were a very mixed group coming from many different social and even national backgrounds. This has to be borne in mind when we seek to interpret them.

Before we ask about the men whose words are recorded in the prophetic books of the Old Testament we ought to spend a moment or two looking at their predecessors, for prophecy as a phenomenon goes back a very long way, certainly to 1000 B.C. Saul met a band of prophets coming away from a sanctuary playing musical instruments and presumably dancing!(I Sam.10). We are not told anything about any message they had to speak; all the emphasis is on their peculiar behaviour, sometimes called ecstasy, which Saul himself caught from them. On the other hand, not long afterwards in the reign of David, we meet Nathan, who

appears on his own. We are told nothing about ecstatic behaviour, but only about his advice to David as to whether or not he should build a Temple(2 Sam.7) and his criticism of David's misconduct with Bathsheba(2 Sam.12). He seems to have had very close links with the royal court and, later in David's life, when there was uncertainty about who should succeed him as King, he supported Solomon as successor (I Kings 1).

On Solomon's death in 922 B.C., the united Kingdom split. The Northern half broke away from Solomon's son and successor and founded its own monarchy. From this time on we have to reckon with two kingdoms, Israel in the North and Judah in the South, each going its separate way(I Kings 12). Both worshipped the same God, of course, and regarded themselves as belonging to the people God had chosen. It was in the Northern Kingdom of Israel that Elijah confronted King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in a highly critical way(I Kings 21) and Michaiah predicted the death of Ahab in battle(I Kings 22). The story of Elijah tells us about groups of prophets who had to hide in caves from the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel, while the story of Michaiah makes it clear that there was a considerable number of other prophets in the King's court who were concerned only to say what would please the King. Already, as early as this, the question of true and false prophets is being raised and we shall have to return to this later.

The words of these early prophets were not, however, collected into books and it is not until about 750 B.C. that we meet prophets whose words were collected. The reason probably is that our biblical prophetic books are all concerned, in one way or another, with a period of history which included shattering blows to both Israel and Judah. It is the period in which Israel was first threatened and finally defeated by the Assyrians, thereby losing its independence totally(722 B.C.) Judah, too, was threatened by the Assyrians(701 B.C.) but survived that crisis only to be defeated by the Babylonians a century later when Jerusalem with its Temple was destroyed in 587 and the whole ruling class of people, priests, elders, royal family, were taken into exile in Babylon where they remained in captivity until 538. Some returned to rebuild the Temple in 520-516 B.C. It is the prophetic message concerning these events which has been preserved for us.

Two books deal specifically with the Northern Kingdom, Amos and Hosea, and of these only Hosea was himself a Northerner. Amos was a Judaeon from Tekoa twelve miles south of Jerusalem but was called to prophesy in Israel. We are told that he was a shepherd or perhaps sheep-breeder and a "dresser of sycamore-figs"(7:14). There at Bethel he seems to deny any association with a prophetic group and to assert his individuality. His authority to prophesy came not from his status but simply from the call he had received from God while going about his everyday work. Not unnaturally he was told to go and prophesy to his own people of Judah and not to cause a disturbance in Israel! Hosea could not be accused of criticising affairs in another country for he was an Israelite. Nevertheless he spoke just as severely to his own people as Amos had done a year or two earlier. The first three chapters of the book ought to tell us a great deal about his personal affairs for they concern his marriage and his family. Unfortunately there is a good deal of uncertainty about the way these chapters are to be interpreted. Some see them merely as allegories of God's relationship with Israel, but if we are to take them at anything like their face value they would tell us that Hosea was ordered to take a harlot as wife, that the three children born to her were all given symbolic names symbolising the deteriorating relationship between Yahweh and Israel, that they separated and that eventually Hosea bought her back. In this case the very life and experience of the prophet was an acted parable of God's dealings with Israel.

All the other prophets were Judaeans speaking mainly about Judah. Isaiah, too, gave his children symbolic names and we are told he was married to a prophetess of whom we hear nothing more(Isaiah 7 & 8). The fact that his call seems to have occurred in the Jerusalem Temple (ch.6) and that he has easy access to the Kings, Ahaz and Hezekiah, may suggest that he held some position of importance in Jerusalem. His contemporary, Micah, on the other hand, came from the country districts to the south-west of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah, nearly a century later, was from a village a few miles north of Jerusalem and was said to have lived "among the priests" there(1:1) but he prophesied mainly in Jerusalem in the period leading up to and just beyond the

fall of the city in 587. There is so much information about Jeremiah's life in the book that we ought to be able to give a fairly detailed account of it. But there is now a considerable body of opinion which believes that these stories are not biographies in the strict sense but, as mentioned earlier, are stories based on his life, told not primarily to give that sort of information but as vehicles for the teaching of those who later collected and compiled his words. So we have to be cautious about telling his life-story.

Ezekiel not only lived "among the priests" - he was one(1:1). He was not able to function as a priest in Jerusalem, though, because the city was in ruins and he was in Babylon, taken there probably in 597 B.C. There, it appears, he lived as a happily married man(24:15ff) and taught groups of elders who gathered at his home(8:1).

Others, like Nahum, may well have been more professional prophets whose place was in the court and whose task was largely to denounce Israel's enemies. Of the important prophet of the Exile whose words are recorded in Isaiah 40-55 we know nothing at all.

What information we have, then, reveals a considerable variety of people but they have one thing in common, a conviction that God has charged them to speak his word to their contemporaries. Because it was a word from God or, better, a word of God, they felt compelled to pass it on(Amos 3:8, Jer.20:9) and their hearers were bound to feel threatened or encouraged by it, as the case may be, for a word of God was a powerful, dynamic thing which carried within itself the power of self-fulfilment. When it was declared by a prophet the fulfilment was thought to be nearer(Isaiah 55:10ff).

It was important, therefore, to know whether a prophet's word really was a Word of God, in which case notice had better be taken of it, for any predictive element in it, any word of judgment, would be bound to come true. If it was merely a word which the prophet had conjured up from his own imagination, then it could be ignored. This question of discerning between true and false prophets was crucial, but how to discern between them was difficult. The story of the conflicting messages of Jeremiah and Hananiah, proclaimed by means of symbolic actions(Jer. 27 & 28) illustrates this well for both claimed to be proclaiming a 'Word of God'. How could their hearers decide? The "sometime after" in 28:12 suggests that even Jeremiah had second thoughts and

needed time to think and listen to God again before he could be sure that his really was the Word of God. Certain criteria came to be laid down but they were not of any great help. If a prophet prophesied of disaster he was probably a true one; if he prophesied prosperity, it was best to reserve judgment until one had seen whether prosperity came or not (Jer.28:8f). A similar point is made in Deuteronomy 18:22: wait and see whether what he prophesies happens or not. This was not much help, of course, to people who had to make decisions about the nation's future. Those who stand in the council of God and listen to his word are the true prophets (Jer.23:18) but how on earth can any hearer tell whether he has or not?

As we have seen, however, predictions did not stand alone; they were based on the peoples' current behaviour, matched against the character of God, and here there ought not to be any doubt as to whether a prophet was right, at least not for people who were prepared to look at things honestly. What was needed was the willingness to change the behaviour patterns. On the whole the prophets were not asking for patterns of behaviour which were novel in Israel and Judah. They were simply demanding behaviour based on laws which were already known, and were condemning breaches of those laws. So the words of Amos against Israel in ch.2:7 & 8 need to be heard against the background of the law collected in Exodus 21-23, while Hosea 4:1 & 3 clearly refer to breaches of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and to the spirit which lies behind them. Here their hearers had no excuse. People who can discern the ills of society and point them out so clearly, relating them to what is already revealed as God's will, must also be listened to carefully when they make predictions about the future.

### III

Not all, but most, of the prophets - especially in the eighth and seventh centuries - were deeply concerned about those social evils which they saw around them and which seemed to deny any real relationship between the people and God. There were royal landlords who were responsible for various tracts of land, for its cultivation and for the raising of sheep and cattle on it. They became wealthy at the expense of their neighbours, private farmers who had their own plot of land which had been in the family for



generations and which they believed had been entrusted to their family by God himself when the Promised Land had been shared out. This is well illustrated by the story of Naboth's Vineyard in I Kings 21 where even the king himself was not allowed to take Naboth's land from him and Jezebel was harshly condemned by Elijah for doing so. Sometimes the landlords were pressed by the 'government' for contributions to the royal exchequer and had to make demands on neighbouring farmers in order to meet their obligations. If the farmers were unable to meet these demands, they might even be taken into slavery. If they tried to go to court to get redress, then the landlords were able to bribe the judges to pass judgment in their favour. The courts were not, of course, highly organised institutions. Justice was dispensed by the elders of a town, village or city in the gateway. It was, therefore, easy for false witnesses to be bribed or threatened and so compelled to give false evidence. It is hardly surprising that violence and murder followed. Much of the prophets' social comment has to be seen against this background, and the background makes it clear that the prophets were not prompted solely by humanitarian feelings. What was at stake was the kind of society which God wanted, in which each individual had his rights and his land and in which king and government were subject to the same constraints as everyone else. As Israelites in the broad sense of the people of God, brought out of Egypt, each individual counted and must be protected. At the same time he was responsible for seeing that others' rights were protected. Any action which endangered society by infringing the rights of others or by failing to fulfil responsibilities towards others drew the condemnation of the prophets speaking in the Name of God.

There were other evils, too, connected with the way the people worshipped God. Ever since they had begun to settle in the Promised Land, the Israelites had had to face the issues raised by Canaanite religion. It was attractive for several reasons, for the Canaanite gods, particularly Baal, were thought to provide the land with fertility by sending essential rain each year to make the crops grow. The worship itself was meant partly to induce this rain by means of sexual rites and an excessive use of wine. No doubt some Israelites began to worship Baal; others worshipped Yahweh but did so as though he were Baal(Hosea 4:11); others

worshipped at the sanctuaries simply for the enjoyment of it(Amos 4:5) and without any thought for the kind of behaviour Yahweh demanded from them(Amos 5:21f, Isaiah 1:10ff, Micah 6:6). It was the fact that this worship revealed a defective understanding of Yahweh that caused the prophets to condemn it so harshly.

Israel and Judah could not isolate themselves from the contemporary international situation and their behaviour here was also a matter of concern to the prophets. Hosea complains about the fickleness of Israel in seeking alliance first with Assyria then with Egypt(7:11) during the very troubled period prior to the fall of Israel in 722. When Judah was threatened by a coalition of Syria and Israel in 735, Isaiah advised his King, Ahaz, to take no action, advice which he felt he could not accept (7:1ff). Instead he sought help from Assyria and consequently found himself subject to them. Later when Hezekiah sought to break free by seeking help from Egypt and then from a Babylonian rebel, Isaiah persuaded him to remain submissive (Is. 31:1,39). Later still, when Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians in 597 and 587 B.C., Jeremiah advised a policy of submission and not rebellion and found himself branded as a traitor(Jer.37:11ff). The exiles were advised to settle down in Babylon and wait for God's time(Jer.29). They were encouraged to prepare for a return home by the exilic prophet responsible for Isaiah 40-55, when he saw that Cyrus the Persian King was quickly gaining ground in the countries nearby.

We could be forgiven for thinking that the prophets were quietists or pacifists or isolationists, but none of these terms does justice to their motives. What they called for was reliance on their Sovereign God and not on merely human institutions. If Israel and Judah really were God's chosen people then they could trust him to take care of all their affairs provided, of course, that they were loyal and obedient in the social and cultic aspects of life as well, for life was all one. All life must be lived in relation to God and must be directed by him.

#### IV

This relationship with God had its basis in Israel's past history. For some prophets like Amos, Hosea and Jeremiah, the basis was the Exodus from Egypt when God had

made them his own people. This act of love demanded a corresponding love to God and to others who also stand in the same relationship with him. When this response was not made, then the fact that they had been called became a negative rather than a positive thing. They were the more culpable(Amos 3:2). Hosea and Jeremiah, though, could look beyond any such punishment to a renewal of the relationship.

Others, like Isaiah and Micah based their judgment on the belief that God had chosen David for a special relationship(II Sam.7), and that this extended to the people too. Obedience and reliance on God were required and failure would bring judgment. Because Ahaz failed in these respects (Isaiah 7) Isaiah could only conclude that the relationship would come to an end. Any future must be on the far side of this judgment and was described in terms of a new David(Is. 11) and a new Zion(Is.2).

Isaiah 40-55 combines both traditions, seeing the return from exile as a Second Exodus with the people coming to a restored Zion, city of David(cf.52:1ff).

It was from within this relationship based on these traditions that Israelites gained their understanding of God for they recognized it was maintained by God's "steadfast love", the love and loyalty which he expressed in guiding, keeping, helping Israel whom he had chosen. He showed his 'righteousness' by doing all that the special relationship demanded, giving them victory but also punishing them when they did wrong. They were to show the same love and loyalty to both God and fellow Israelites and were to do for God and for one another all that they ought to do as people called into being by God.

The choice of Israel as God's own people did not mean that God had no concern for the other peoples of the world, or that he had no power over them. According to Exodus 7:13 he had been able to harden the Pharaoh's heart. So Amos believed that without giving them the same status as Israel he had nevertheless brought the Philistines from Caphtor (Crete) and the Syrians from Kir into their present territories(Amos 9:7). Isaiah believed he could use the Assyrians to punish Judah(Isaiah 10:5). On the positive side he could use Cyrus the Persian King to bring about the return from exile and the prophet could even call him the "anointed" of Yahweh(Isaiah 44:48, 45:1) even though Cyrus may never have heard of him.

This recognition of God's universal power by the prophet in exile led him to express in the clearest way that there was only one God(Is.44:6). Israel, of course, had never recognized any other god's authority over her, not at least in her better moments, and certainly had never worshipped a family of gods as did her neighbours(Exod.20:3). But the earlier prophets, though they demanded adherence to this first Commandment, did not deny that other nations had their gods. But by 550 B.C., strict monotheism had made its appearance.

## V

This, then, was the message which the prophets proclaimed, and 'proclaimed' is the right word because they were, for the most part, preachers. How, then, did their spoken words come to be written down and collected into the books which we now read? All we can say for certain is that some of their hearers valued their words sufficiently to preserve them and, having preserved them, came to see that they were still valid in their own later day and situation and could be used again. Naturally, they would need some interpretation to make them wholly relevant. Then, when the prophets' words did come to be written down, some of these later interpretations were also included in the book. For instance, it seems likely that later preachers in Judah used the words Amos had addressed to Israel at Bethel and applied his judgments to Judah. But, since in Judah there was a strong hope of renewal beyond judgment, they proclaimed that as well. When Amos' words were written down, their hopes, as expressed in chapter 9, were included even though they seemed to contradict the finality of judgment which Amos had seen for the Northern Kingdom (5: 18-20, 9:1).

So, during the Exile in Babylon, the words of earlier prophets were probably collected and arranged by people known as the Deuteronomists who were interested in showing how the exile had been predicted by the prophets' because of the peoples' sin.

The New Testament continued this process of re-interpretation. The prophets had hoped for a new king who would reign in justice and bring peace not only to Israel but, through Israel, to the whole world. The early Christians, who believed their God was none other than the God of

of Israel, naturally saw in Jesus the fulfilment of those prophetic hopes.

## VI

Modern Christians therefore need to study the Old Testament prophets with care to see how the word of God brought by them to Israel and Judah may be further reinterpreted for today's world. Anyone who follows in this prophetic tradition must understand at least three basic things about Old Testament prophecy.

First, there is an inextricable link between experience and inspiration. Prophets never base their word solely on their own experience and their own reflection upon it. There must always be a word from God. But neither can they empty their minds so as to provide a blank slate for God to write on. They must use their own minds to think long and hard about their situation. The human search and the divine revelation are inseparable.

Second, following from this, prophecy is rooted in the very nature of God and the understanding of his nature is gained partly through past tradition and partly through present experience seen in the light of that tradition. For Christians, the tradition now includes the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as well as the Old Testament. By reflecting on that total tradition from a contemporary point of view and leaving room for God's continuing activity through his Spirit, we are able to see what he is saying to us and to the world today.

Third, it remains a fact that different people will still see things in a different light and therefore may speak different words. We are then faced with the same uncertainty as people in Old Testament times who found it hard to discriminate between true and false prophets. This is particularly true of those who predict judgment - or Paradise! What we cannot do is simply ignore them. Certainly we should listen carefully when anyone claiming to be a prophet condemns behaviour and attitudes. If they had been open-minded and honest, the people of Old Testament times would have recognised the truth of what their prophets told them, for they had the law and tradition to guide them. So we need the same openness and honesty to accept judgment based on the whole biblical tradition, including that of Jesus. In the end it is this revelation of God in Christ

which must always be for us the touchstone by which we judge the authenticity of the prophetic word as it is given to us by God, or as it is passed on to us through others.

# James Dunn

## Jesus the Prophet

It is always interesting to note how perspectives and emphases change over the years. In New Testament studies the relation between Jesus and the Spirit is one such subject. In the first half of the present century interest tended to focus on the question, Why did Jesus not say more about the Spirit? or, Why are so few sayings of Jesus about the Spirit preserved? Scott, for example, came to the conclusion that *"the only incontestable reference to the Spirit in the Synoptic\* teaching is Mark 3:29 and its parallels,"* and further, *"There is no indication that he [Jesus] thought of his teaching, or his relation to God, or the new life he offered to men, in terms of the Spirit."*<sup>1</sup> Vincent Taylor argued that, since the first Christian communities were so confident in and conscious of their possession of the Spirit, no need was felt to remember and repeat sayings of Jesus about the Spirit.<sup>2</sup> And Barrett suggested that *"direct emphasis upon the Spirit had to be avoided because Jesus was keeping his Messiahship secret."*<sup>3</sup> An overlapping area of interest is the question whether Jesus thought of himself as the Prophet expected at the end of the age\* (since in Jewish thought 'prophet' and 'inspired by the Spirit' were more or

less synonymous descriptions). Here too, typical of the earlier findings from the first half of the century was Oscar Cullman's thesis that Jesus did not think of himself as 'the Prophet' and that *"The Synoptic writers did not express their personal faith in Jesus by means of this conception."*<sup>4</sup>

At the present time however the weight of interest and scholarly opinion seems to have shifted in the opposite direction. For example, Edward Schillebeeckx in both his large christological\* studies has emphasized that one of the most important categories in the earliest assessment of Jesus was that of *"eschatological prophet like Moses."*<sup>5</sup> Buhner has shown how far even the high christology of the Fourth Gospel can be understood and explained in terms of a prophet christology.<sup>6</sup> Lampe has tried to argue that the whole of christology can be reduced in effect to that of a man inspired, albeit in a climactic or pre-eminent degree.<sup>7</sup> And I may perhaps mention my own two studies, *Jesus and the Spirit* and *Christology in the Making*<sup>8</sup> in which I have attempted to demonstrate that a good deal more can be said about Jesus and the Spirit than the previous generation thought and that 'inspiration' is a category not to be dispensed with or downgraded even when set alongside the category 'incarnation'.

How did this shift in emphasis come about? Principally I think for two reasons: (1) We can now see more clearly than perhaps was possible, at that stage of Life of Jesus research 40-50 years ago, that the concept of Spirit-inspired prophet is an important clue to Jesus' own self-understanding - not necessarily the whole solution, but an important element in the whole nevertheless. (2) We can also see in a more clearly defined way that 'prophet-christology' was an important element in the earliest Christians' understanding and assessment of Jesus - again not the only christology or necessarily the most important way of understanding Christ, but an important element nonetheless.

I will attempt to demonstrate the strength of both these claims in what follows.

## II. Jesus' own self-estimate

One of the features of the earlier discussions was a considerable unwillingness on the part of many New Testament scholars to speak of Jesus' self-consciousness. This was in



large measure the result of various psychologising extravagances in 19th century Lives of Jesus\*, and of the consequent reaction expressed most forcibly in Rudolf Bultmann's famous assertion, that "*we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus.*"<sup>9</sup> With the so-called 'new quest of the historical Jesus'\* in the second half of the century, however, the desire to say something about Jesus' own self-understanding has re-emerged - and for good theological reason. For unless there is sufficient continuity between Jesus' own opinion of himself and the early Church's claims about Christ, the latter are open to sharp and potentially destructive cross-examination.

At the same time the inquiry has broadened out from a search for explicit statements of Jesus on the subject to an investigation also of the *implications* of his words and actions. If we want to know, for example, Jesus' teaching on 'repentance', it is not enough to count the number of times the words 'repent' and 'repentance' occur. As Jeremiah has pointed out, we must consider also such parables as the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) and the Pharisee and the Tax-collector (Luke 18), as well as the exchange between Jesus and the rich young ruler (Mark 10), or between Jesus and Zaccheus (Luke 19). So too with the question of Jesus and the Spirit, it is not enough to ask whether Jesus said, "*your Father who is in heaven will give good things to those who ask him*" (Matt. 7:11), or "*the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him*" (Luke 11:12). Nor is it enough to confine the issue to whether Jesus said, "*If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons...*" (Matt. 12:28), or "*If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons...*" (Luke 11:20). The question is the larger one of whether there is also an implicit attitude or belief on the subject in Jesus' other teaching or in his actions.

Here we can point to several important strands of evidence.

(a) *The eschatological prophet*\* - Isaiah 61:1-2. Earlier discussions of Jesus in his relation to the Spirit failed to appreciate the importance of this text in an inquiry into Jesus' self-understanding: Cullman in particular seems to have ignored it altogether. It is not simply a matter of noting the use Luke makes of it in Luke 4:16-30 as an example of the Evangelist's view of Jesus rather than of Jesus' view of himself. For the same passage is clearly

alluded to in the first two beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-4/Luke 6: 20-1) and as the climax of Jesus' reply to the disciples of the Baptist (Matt. 11:5/Luke 7:22). These allusions would be generally agreed in current scholarship, and most would accept that one or more of the sayings can be traced back to Jesus with confidence. In which case we can take it that Jesus intended the allusion to Isaiah 61:1. More important, we can take it that Jesus thereby indicated (by implication) that he saw himself as fulfilling the role of the one predicted by Isaiah. In other words, when Luke depicts Jesus as reading from Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue at Nazareth and as claiming its fulfilment in himself (Luke 4:21), he is showing us what Jesus did indeed think of himself. We can then say as a firm historical fact that Jesus did believe that the Spirit of the Lord had come upon him (at Jordan, presumably) and that he had been thereby anointed to preach good news to the poor, etc. Moreover, if the prominence given to the claim is anything to go by (first reported proclamation after his baptism and temptation; first beatitudes; climax in reply to the Baptist), we may take it that this belief and claim was central in the self-understanding which came to expression in Jesus' life and ministry.

(b) *The eschatological exorcist.* No one doubts that Jesus was a successful exorcist. Twelftree has recently subjected this dimension of Jesus' ministry to fresh investigation.<sup>10</sup> He has rightly re-emphasized the importance of this aspect of Jesus' work, as well as illuminating its characteristic and distinctive features. The most striking of these is that Jesus evidently saw his exorcisms as (the beginning of) the final defeat of Satan (Mark 3:25-9 pars.; Luke 10:17-18). His exorcisms were for Jesus a clear sign and manifestation of the final reign of God already in operation (Matt. 12:28, Luke 11:20). Almost as striking is the source of his success as an exorcist which Jesus names as the Spirit of God, by implication in Mark 3:28-9, and probably explicitly in Matthew 12:28. It is not a case of Jesus claiming to exorcise in his own right or by virtue of his own status. Rather he saw himself as one inspired and empowered by the Spirit of God.

(c) *Sent by God.* In the light of the above evidence, other elements within the tradition of Jesus' sayings become more luminous. We are not surprised to find it being recalled that Jesus spoke of himself explicitly as a prophet:

"a prophet is not without honour, except in his own home town..."(Mark 6:4 pars.); "I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem"(Luke 13:33). Jesus evidently saw himself as standing wholly within the prophetic tradition, as the climax of the line of prophets no doubt, but still within that line of men inspired by the Spirit of God to speak the word of God. Similarly when Jesus spoke of himself as one 'sent' by God(particularly Matt.10:40/Luke 10:16; Matt.15:24), we hear expressed a consciousness of prophetic vocation such as we find in Jeremiah 49:14 and Obadiah 1. Jesus saw himself as commissioned and inspired by God's Spirit to proclaim God's final word to Israel. Similarly the authority with which Jesus taught the will of God, setting it against the established interpretation of the law and even against the most obvious meaning of the law(as in Matt.5:21-48), has its nearest parallels in the prophets' conviction that they spoke words directly from God even when critical of the established authority of cult and state.

(d) *Jesus and the neighbour.* The message of the prophets is often characterized by its championing of the poor and criticism of a cult more concerned with ritual correctness than justice (among the most powerful passages, Isa.1:10-17; 58:1-12; Amos 5:21-24; 8:4-6; Mic.6:6-8). Jesus not only emphasized *his* mission to the poor - the materially poor and exploited (above (a)), but, according to Matthew 25:31-46, he did not confine that concern to the disadvantaged within Israel. His notorious openness to 'taxcollectors and sinners' included a respect for and friendship with women(Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42; 11:27-28) which in modern society would provide several front-page sensations in the popular press. So too his parable of the Good Samaritan(Luke 10:29-37) criticizes the religious bureaucrats (priest and levite) for presumably counting ritual purity mor important than an act of mercy, and presents as the hero a despised half-breed and religious sectarian. In all this Jesus cannot but have been consciously standing in the tradition of the prophets(cf. Mark 12:1-8; Matt.23:39-42; Luke 13:33), their message a critical force in shaping his own message and life-style, even when he gave it a personal embodiment and breadth of application beyond what they could have envisaged.

It would be very hard therefore to deny that Jesus saw himself and his work in prophetic terms, understood that he had been anointed and inspired by the Spirit in both his preaching and exorcistic ministry. We can and should of course say more than that, about Jesus transcending these categories of 'prophet' and 'inspired man' as well as filling them. But we cannot say less than that. Nor can we ignore or dispense with these categories, for the simple reason that Jesus used them himself in the way outlined above.

### III. The First Christians' View of Jesus

How did Jesus' own disciples speak of him? Did they think of him as a man inspired by God's Spirit, as a prophet, or as the (eschatological) prophet? It is clear enough that the most important category used in the earliest evangelistic and apologetic\* outreach after Pentecost was that of *Messiah*. As the Acts of the Apostles testifies, a dominant concern of the early believers was to demonstrate to their fellow Jews that a crucified Messiah was not a contradiction in terms (e.g. Acts 3:18; 17:2-3; 26:23; so also I Cor. 1:23). So fundamental for the first Christians was this claim that already by the time of Paul the title 'Christ' had virtually become a proper name - Jesus the Messiah had become Jesus Messiah, Jesus Christ.

We should not forget however that there was more than one messianic figure in Jewish expectation of that time. We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, that there were those who cherished the hope of three messianic figures - a Davidic messiah, a priestly messiah (Messiah of Aaron) and the prophet like Moses, where both Deuteronomy 18:18 and Isaiah 61:1 were drawn upon. If we now look behind the Messiah title in its application to Jesus to inquire which of these roles was the most important, a rather striking fact emerges. There is no question that Jesus was regarded as Son of David, but apart from Matthew's Gospel, surprisingly little use is made of the title (Mark 12:35-7; Acts 13:23; Rom. 1:3; II Tim. 2:8; Rev. 5:5; 22:16). Apart from the letter to the Hebrews even less is made of his priestly role - alluded to only in Romans 8:34 and I John 2:1-2. His role as prophet on the other hand is referred to more often than has usually been realized, and, more important, his status as prophet remains a fundamental element in the Evangelists'

portrayal of him. Let me try to demonstrate this briefly.

(a) The earliest proclamation as represented in the Acts of the Apostles stressed the claim on several occasions that Jesus was the prophet like Moses. Both Peter and Stephen quote the promise of Moses(Deut.18:15, 18) - *"God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up"*(Acts 3:22; 7:37). Jesus is that one; he had fulfilled that promise; he was the long-expected prophet. So too in Peter's sermon to Cornelius we are not surprised to find an echo of Isaiah 61:1, an echo which can hardly be accidental - *"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power [so that] he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil"*(Acts 10:38). Whatever else he was, for the first Christians Jesus was the Spirit-anointed (messiah-ed) one, the man inspired by the Spirit in the last days, the long-awaited prophet.

(b) Paul says very little about Jesus while on earth, though what he does say seems to echo the theme of the Spirit-inspired prophet at several points. His talk of God sending forth his Son(Gal.4:4) probably draws on the language used in the Old Testament to express the prophet's own sense of divine commissioning(e.g. Judg.6:8; II Chron.36:15; Jer.1:7; Ezek.2:3; Mic.6:4; Hag.1:12), and particularly Jesus' own parable of the son who is sent as the climax of the prophetic mission(Mark 12:6). In II Corinthians 1:21-2 he makes a small pun when he speaks of God anointing us with the Spirit into Christ(= the anointed one). And in Romans 1:3-4 he contrasts Jesus' Davidic sonship with his divine Sonship, with the link once again between the latter and the Holy Spirit. In other words, insofar as Paul thinks of Jesus' life on earth, the picture of the Spirit-anointed Son, of the prophet commissioned and sent, is not far from his mind.

(c) With the Synoptic Evangelists the picture is the same, only much more explicit. Jesus' ministry cannot be understood except as a Spirit-empowered, a Spirit-inspired ministry. Jesus does not begin his work until he has first been anointed by the Spirit at Jordan. It is the Spirit who drives him into the wilderness for his period of testing, perhaps we should speak of his probationary period of testing. And Luke in particular has no doubt that his return from the wilderness and his launching into mission was all in the power of the Spirit(Luke 4:14,18). In a similar way,

Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 as one of the prophecies which both explain the character and success of Jesus' mission and which was thus fulfilled in Jesus - "... *I will put my Spirit upon him...*"(Matt.12:18). Likewise all three have no doubt that the key to Jesus' success as a healer and exorcist was his empowering by the Spirit(Matt.12:28; Mark 3:29; Luke 4:17-27), and, as most commentators agree, all three preserve the deliberate allusion to Deuteronomy 18:15 in the account of the transfiguration - "*Hear him*"(Mark 9:7 pars.). In other words, for the Synoptic Evangelists, too, Jesus is the prophet like Moses. This is all the more striking in the case of Matthew and Luke, both of whom begin their Gospels with the account of Jesus' virginal conception by the power of the Spirit: even though he was Son of God from the beginning he was still dependent on the anointing, inspiring and empowering of the Spirit for his mission. Even as the Son of God, he is still a man inspired, a prophet anointed by the Spirit of God.

(d) Even more striking is the fact that this emphasis still comes through clearly in John's Gospel. John's presentation of the Word of God incarnate, of the Son of Man descending from and ascending again to heaven, of the Son of God sent from the Father soon to return to that glory which he had from the beginning of the world, is so overwhelming and awe-inspiring that it is easy to ignore the other dimensions in John's presentation of Christ. One of these is his prophet christology. For example, Jesus is indeed to be identified as 'the prophet'(the best reading of John 7:52), and the strong motif of Jesus as the one 'sent' from God is probably a further development of the earlier typically Old Testament talk of a prophet as one 'sent' from God (see above (b)). So too it comes as something of a shock when we find that John, as much as the Synoptics, finds it necessary to bring out the fact that Jesus' ministry depended on his anointing by the Spirit and his being given the Spirit without measure(John 1:32-3; 3:34). Even though he was the Word of God from before time, nevertheless as the Word incarnate he is a man whose ministry of word and deed depends on the inspiration and empowering of the Spirit for its effectiveness.

So we can see very clearly how important this relation between Jesus and the Spirit was for the first Christians, from the beginning when they first began to proclaim him to

their fellow Jews, but also throughout the first century as the different Gospel writers sought to unfold the truth and significance of Jesus in their different ways. Of course that relation was not the whole truth of Jesus, or the complete explanation of his significance. But it was part of the whole, an important element within the total explanation. As such it should not be ignored. Without it our understanding of Jesus is defective. There is more to Jesus, a lot more, than an inspired prophet, but unless we also understand Jesus as a man inspired by God's Spirit, as the prophet, we will misunderstand him.

#### IV. Conclusions

Here then we have an important category in the earliest attempts to present and portray Jesus, a category which we can even trace back to Jesus' own self-understanding. The understanding of Jesus as prophet, as inspired, should therefore influence our own attempts to present and portray Jesus in our own time. In particular, this aspect of Jesus' earthly life and ministry strengthens the justifiable and praiseworthy desire on the part of believers to see in Jesus' life on earth a model and pattern to inspire their own.

(a) Although Jesus is more than a prophet, more indeed than the prophet, nevertheless as prophet his anointing was the precursor of the outpouring of the Spirit in the new age inaugurated at the Jordan and broadened out at Pentecost. In those who follow in the steps of Jesus, who receive the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Pentecost, is fulfilled the promise of Joel, *"and they shall prophesy"* (Acts 2:17-18). Whatever else this implies, it means also that the prophetic concerns both of the Old Testament prophets, and of Jesus himself, should be ours today. The practice of the presence of God, in waiting on him for inspiration in prayer, the concern for a religion of the heart and not merely outward form and ritual, for a religion of deed as well as word, the championing of the poor and oppressed, of the irreligious and social outcast, all this must remain a challenge to those who follow Jesus the prophet. Jesus the prophet shows us that prophecy involves not just speaking from God words that strengthen and encourage (I Cor. 14:3), but a living from God which may well upset accepted practices in both religion and society.



(b) In Romans 1:3-4, where Jesus is both in one sense "according to the flesh" and in another "according to the Spirit", Paul may well be thinking of Jesus as the archetype of humanity caught in the overlap of the ages. Although the Son of God, he is not far removed from the flesh, he is not distant from sin. On the contrary, he came "in the very likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom.8:3), and in his death was even "made sin" (II Cor.5:21). In other words, he knew in an archetypal way the tension between flesh and Spirit which Paul outlines so vividly in Romans 7-8 and Galatians 5. In this aspect too then Jesus is a model for us (cf. Rom.6:17, where it is probably Jesus who is thought of as the "pattern of teaching"). He shows us how to live the life of the new age in the midst of the old, how to live "according to the Spirit" even when we are yet "in the flesh", how to live according to the standards and values of the kingdom even when that cuts across the racial, social and religious conventions of the day (cf. e.g. Rom.14:17, Gal.6:8). Jesus the prophet shows us that living "in the power of the Spirit" means an active involvement in this world which can only be sustained by the degree of independence and detachment from this world which he found in the solitude of prayerful communion with his Father (Mark 1:35; 6:46; 14:35-36).

(c) In his relation to the Spirit, Jesus is also the pattern for our hope. According to Paul, Jesus in his resurrection is the "first fruits" of the general resurrection (I Cor.15:2-23). His resurrection body is the archetype or pattern of the resurrection body (I Cor.15:49; Phil.3:21). Paul also calls the resurrection body a "spiritual body" (I Cor.15:44), that is, a wholeness of existence determined by the Spirit of God. The present life of the believer can therefore be characterized by its relation to this future hope. Those who have received the Spirit have received the first fruits, the first instalment, the guarantee of that complete work of salvation (Rom.8:23; Eph.1:13-14; Phil.1:6); that is why our hope does not make us ashamed (Rom.5:5). The Christian life can be described as a process of becoming like Christ in his glory (II Cor.3:18; 4:13-5:5). As members of the last Adam we belong to a new humanity even now being formed by the life-giving Spirit (I Cor.15:45); Christ is both the elder brother of the new family of



humanity and the power of God that creates and renews the life of grace until, in the end, it is the only life. Or, to use the imagery of the writer to the Hebrews, Christ is the pioneer who has opened up the way to real and true existence and who helps us as we seek to follow him.

We have looked at only one aspect of the reality of Christ, at only one dimension even of his whole life on earth. It has been an aspect too much and too long neglected in Christian thought. But I hope I have been able to bring out at least some of its importance. Jesus the prophet, Jesus the archetypal man of the Spirit, is a powerful stimulus to faith - a significance to reflect on that stirs us in our christological reflection and an example to encourage and challenge us in our discipleship.

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## Glossary

*apologetic* - attempting to explain and defend one's faith.

*Christology* - Christianity's attempts to understand and express the significance of Jesus.

*eschatological* - from the Greek, *eschaton*, meaning 'end' - having to do with the end of this epoch/age/era, or of history itself.

*Eschatological Prophet/Prophet at the end of the age* - one of the figures expected by many Jews of Jesus' time to intervene at the end of the present era of history.

*Lives of Jesus/Quest of the historical Jesus* - 19th century Liberal Protestant attempts to write fuller biographies of Jesus than is now thought possible, which would appeal to the values cherished by different sections of 19th century society.

*New quest of the historical Jesus* - attempts to get behind our earliest written sources in the Gospels to the original material which stems from Jesus himself or from his immediate circle.

*Synoptic Gospels* - the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) which share a lot of common material.

# Adrian Hastings

## Who Can Prophecy Today?

Prophecy is a function. Prophets are people. Prophets prophesy. But prophecy is also on occasion the work of non-prophets - even Balaam's ass or Caiaphas may do (Numb. 22, Jn. 11:51) - while prophets do not always prophesy and some seeming prophets turn out to be, or become, false prophets. Who in our days is a prophet? Who should be? How far is the church itself prophetic? This chapter will attempt to respond in some way to these and related questions.

Prophecy in the Biblical-Christian tradition is not revelation and it is not teaching about revelation. It is a message to the world about the world now, about the immediate or coming human situation, about what is wrong with society. It is not given as human opinion, but as God's judgment upon humanity. The prophet is essentially a religiously minded person, concerned with nothing more than the doing of the divine will, almost fanatically so; but, while a constant human tendency is to institutionalise and ritualise, to sacralise religious behaviour, the prophet breaks in on ecclesiasticism and ritualism to locate the only finally religious behaviour - that is to say the behaviour which most adequately expresses the worship of God - in justice,



compassion, generosity, the loving service of one person for another. And he locates this true religiosity in just those aspects of justice and compassion which matter most here and now, but which contemporary society and the contemporary church are most prone to sin against.

The prophet, then, stands on the knife edge between the religious and the secular, between sacralisation and secularisation. The professional temptation of the religious is to establish a complex 'special' world of religious rites, rules and institutions, as apart as possible from the normal secular round of human affairs: a church apart, a religious world of meaning apart, in which the duty of the religious person is mostly located. In a religiously respectful world, it is hoped, that 'special' religious network will be the most central, privileged area. That is Sacralisation. The seculariser breaks in on it to declare religious rites unimportant and boring: what matters to people is not the specifically religious, but the pragmatic world of kinship, sex, commerce, politics, human relations in all their forms. Now what the prophet declares is a judgment upon both sacraliser and seculariser. What matters to God, he says, is not *"The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord"* (Jer.7:4), not religious ritual, not 'Lord, Lord' (Matt.7:21), but human relations in their decisive moral aspect. His verbal judgment now refers to, and depends upon, the ultimate judgment of God. In that judgment the sheep are divided from the goats by no 'religious' criteria at all, but by that of loving service to one's fellows. You fed me when I was hungry, gave me drink when I was thirsty, visited me in prison. Or you did not. But when, Lord? - When you did or did not do it to the least of my brethren. The prophet re-locates the heart of religious meaning within the secular world from which the religious person, the religious institutionaliser, had subtly withdrawn it. But in doing so, he does of course overturn the whole theory of secularisation. For nothing is now secular. Nothing is irrelevant to the worship of God. There is no area of life from which we can keep religion out: neither politics, nor sex, no slavery, nor buying or selling. The 'religious' person and the seculariser are really in alliance. They want the lines well drawn and tended: religion here, secular life there. Sundays for God. Weekdays for modern man. Keep religion



out of politics. Keep all the dirty linen of the 'modern world' out of the Church. Of course, the clearer such lines are drawn, the more irrelevant does Sunday and church become until the Sunday is secularised too and the church closed. No, says the prophet, it won't do, for religion is the worship of God, and God is far more pleased or displeased by what you do on weekdays than what you do on Sunday - if only because there are six weekdays for every one Sunday. Religion is much more about morals than about ritual, says the prophet, but by morals I mean the great divide in human life between bullying, cruelty, organised oppression, the cults of affluence and power upon the one hand, and generosity, self-sacrifice, the care of the weak, the fellowship of the poor, sheer love, upon the other. The hard core of human immorality derives from the hierarchy of earthly power, political and commercial, and its ruthless urge to exploit the weak and to enrich the strong.

Now, why can't all this be said and done by the Church itself and its regular ministry? Why call a prophet in? If this is the message of Christ, then it was the message committed to the Church, and it is for the Pope, the patriarchs, the moderators, to declare it. And don't they do so? - Yes it is. And to a very important extent they do. The sheer reading of the scriptures, the celebration of the Eucharist are prophetic and very dangerous exercises, proclaiming human freedom, equality, fraternity, and so calling into question the very structuring of society. You cannot expurgate Christianity of its prophetic threat. But you can, of course, try - and many an establishment ecclesiastic has done his best to do so: to make of organised Christianity a sanctioning of blatant injustice in society (to be put right only in the next world), instead of a challenging in the light of the life, death and teaching of Christ of the sinfulness of contemporary humanity, particularly powerful humanity.

Of course, Church leaders have been true prophets time and again; nevertheless, as we can see very well from even a little look at Church history, it has too seldom happened. If it does not happen, it is chiefly for three reasons. One is that, especially in a Christian country (that is to say, a country with a majority of at least nominal Christians among its citizens), the Church itself very easily becomes part of the wealthy establishment of power. Bishops become



barons and then members of the House of Lords. The vicar is next in the village hierarchy to the squire. The more church leaders are incorporated within the secular structure of power, the less able they are to challenge it. They come instead, not merely to be silent about the sins of society, but even to share in them. So, in the 18th century, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel owned a West Indian estate worked by slaves, just as other wealthy did. Missionary Society as it was, it could not agree that its slaves should be preached to or baptised, lest their labour be impaired thereby, to its great loss. A Pope, who was also ruler of the Papal States of central Italy, was largely controlled in his attitude to government everywhere by the need to maintain his own position, repress revolution, keep the right allies. These may seem extreme cases, but they symbolise a position from which church leadership seldom wholly escapes: it is chained by prudence if not by actual participation in the crimes of the strong. A preoccupation with institutional survival leads it to practise complicity with governments which offer it assistance or privilege of some sort, and so secure a very large measure of church silence.

The second reason is that of the marked tendency of the professionally religious to retreat from the secular to the sacred, to declare the insignificance of - and their own relative lack of interest in - what goes on outside the 'soul' or the church doors, so long as religious rites and institutions are not affected, and so long as they are not prevented from preaching about the next world to their faithful. Purely doctrinal teaching, and strongly other-worldly teaching - stressing the virtues of patience, obedience, poverty, disregard for the things of this world - can be so imparted as to be downright anti-prophetic. Such teaching somehow dodges all the real issues and crimes of contemporary society. Hence it seldom leads to the persecution of the preacher. This in fact leads us into the third reason: a recurring tendency within the church's moral teaching to invert the morality: to play down the duty of serving the needy, to play up sexual sins, especially the sexual sins of those who have been deprived of power (of women rather than of men, therefore), and specifically ecclesiastical 'sins' (the breaking of one or another article of canon law). Such teaching appears highly spiritual,

it is a morality of the sacred rather than of the secular, and it hardly upsets the powerful. It obviously fits in well with an other-worldly spirituality of religious withdrawal. No society can operate without a morality, without collective standards of approved and condemned behaviour; but moralities vary greatly and for centuries ecclesiastical morality has had a markedly different character from Jesus' own highly prophetic morality.

Collectively these tendencies produce a Church whose leadership very seldom takes on its shoulders the truly prophetic burden of its founder. On the contrary, the Church and its leadership come to reflect only too well, in a sacral mode, the very disorders of society against which it should be protesting.

In such circumstances, if Christ's message is to be proclaimed in all its cutting power, with all the danger that that implies for its proclaimer, this will not be done by Church authority as a whole. For the prophet, the proclaimer of God's word, finds herself compelled to speak to the church, to witness indeed against the church, at least as much as against society. The world can indeed be expected to be the world, but the church should certainly not be a pious replica of the world; hence the true prophet will be more damning about the church than the world - about the Sadducees and Pharisees than about Pilate and Herod. It is often comfortably alleged by Church people that the true prophet will not be Church-minded but will leave the Church alone and address the world only. But that is just what the true prophet cannot do. The reason she cannot do it is not because she is concerned with religion and 'Sacred' things rather than with 'secular' issues of justice and mercy, but just because her task is to whip the church for being concerned with 'sacred' things and not with justice and mercy. Her role is far less to point out the sins of the world than to point out the sin of the church in falsely analysing the sins of the world. She has to lay bare a pious but essentially ungodly pseudo-morality and offer instead a true one. Of course, if she does this, she is threatening the leaders both of the Church and of the world and the complicity that runs between them. For she will be saying that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, that the weak are denied justice and even land and food, that the powerful are strengthened in their oppression by the smiling opportunism of

ecclesiastical tame cats purring beside their hearth rugs, by the black mantilla which the President's wife deferentially wears as she is given a very special papal audience, by the shares in the State bank which the Church would hate to lose, by the dry Martini which Caiaphas sips on Pilate's verandah. "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets... You witness against yourselves. You are the sons of those who murdered the prophets." (Matt. 23:29-31). There may indeed be little for it but to kill the troublesome prophet. Later on, at a safe distance in time, we can, of course, give her due honour, put up the memorial tablet, establish the commemorative lecture. But first of all she must be removed. Thus in El Salvador, Archbishop Romero was proving altogether too dangerous to the establishment. And so as he raised up the chalice of Christ's blood at Mass in March 1980, he was shot and killed, and his place of archbishop-prophet in a nation at war between oppressors and oppressed was left unfillable.

Not all prophets, of course, are murdered. Though Archbishop Helder Camara is still alive, his house has been riddled on occasion with machine-gun fire - more, perhaps, a salutary warning than an attempted assassination. Who else have been prophets in our time? C.F. Andrews was a prophet against imperialism in the British India of the 1920s, Dick Sheppard was a prophet of peace in the 1930s. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a prophet who would not succumb to nationalism even when his country was at war in the 1940s. Trevor Huddleston, writer of 'Naught for your Comfort', was a prophet against racialism in the South Africa of the 1950s, and Beyers Naude in South Africa today. Solzhenitsyn has been for decades a prophet against the oppression of ordinary decent Russians by the Soviet system. Today prophets and 'schools' or 'sons' of prophets (II Kings 2:5) abound in Latin America, and such disciples may often be murdered too, for disciples are no better than their masters. Thus three nuns and a fellow worker were murdered in El Salvador on 2nd December 1980: Sisters Maura Clark, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and Miss Jean Donovan. Ordinary names for four Christian religious women gunned to death for their fidelity to the example of Oscar Romero.

It is not perhaps the most useful exercise to search around the Church identifying individually true prophets, especially as it is of the nature of the prophetic role that



it can be a passing one. The true prophet has no claim to be one for life, no right to object to a divine declaration of redundancy, no permanent charism of infallibility! He can be called for a purpose and then dropped by God, and he has no ground for complaint. But the poor man having had his taste of the pulpit, or the microphone, may not so easily recognise this, and go on pontificating about many things on which he is quite incapable of prophesying. He is, after all, human too. And the prophet is likely to be odd - struggling with asthma and a pretty mixed-up personality as was Dick Sheppard; a man of fits and starts. The prophet does not just work from 9 to 5, at least not as a prophet.

The point is that the prophet can come from anywhere and be of any type. We have just named two archbishops as prophets - both hard-working reliable priests, people in fact combining two apparently very different roles. Don't they give the lie then to the view that the official church cannot prophesy? Yes and no. The official church can prophesy, and Archbishops Romero and Camara have clearly done so - both to their own countries and to the world. Ideally, what they have done, every pope and archbishop and moderator can do. But, of course, they don't.

There is in the clarity of message, the personal courage, the loneliness of stance, of such as these a quality that is not easily shared institutionally by many. As a matter of fact, they stand not quite alone but apart from the great mass of the Catholic episcopate, and their message does challenge the Church's leadership itself in its self-understanding, its deep connections with oppressive secular power. It may be, ideally, that for instance the whole Catholic church could stand truly shoulder to shoulder with an Archbishop Romero, but it is quite certain that in fact at present it does not do so, and even that the dominant power in the Church both in Rome and in Latin America has little sympathy with such as these. A Cardinal Baggio, an Archbishop Lopez Trujillo, sees the priorities for the Church and the maintenance of its established position within the power structures of this world in very different and more ecclesiastically prudent terms. If Archbishop Romero was a prophet, he was speaking to and judging not only the government and society of El Salvador and South America, but almost primarily the Church herself and the way in which for



generations she has provided a sacred veneer of respectability for such societies while gaining a comfortable share of the privileges therein.

Very probably only an archbishop can really deliver that message effectively. And so while the prophet can be anyone, a prophet who is to be heard by a hierarchical Church is likely to be a priest, even a bishop. God raises up a voice within the Church to speak to the Church, in order that the Church may speak with evangelical directness to contemporary humanity. The true prophet is characterised, then, by a lot of things: her message is unambiguously faithful to the New Testament and yet also unambiguously contemporary. It does not require complex interpretation because it is not obscurely phrased as many ecclesiastics' statements are. Yet its contemporaneity does not mean any basic dependance on contemporary ideology. On the contrary, its specific character depends on speaking to the age without identifying with the age's view of itself or with any contemporary power system - and all contemporary ideologies belong to one or other power system. Prophecy is not philosophy. It is not sociological or theological analysis. It is not intellectually the most sophisticated of communication techniques. It just points with painful clarity and intensity to what are, in the light of the Gospel, today's moral priorities and to how they are neglected. Such behaviour makes one unpopular - rather inevitably.

Two questions may here be asked. The first is: how far is there room for prophecy within a 'liberal' society? The more oppressive and authoritarian a society, the more it is tailored to the judgment of the prophet: Nazi Germany at war, the Gulags of Soviet Russia, South African racialism, the 'National Security State' in parts of Latin America - the role of prophecy in all these atrocious situations is clear enough. But the liberal society, even if it includes great injustices, somehow muffles prophecy - by an over-coverage of all issues, grave and trivial, largely to the financial profit of the media, by the blurring of edges inevitable in such a society; and then just by being nice to prophets and asking them to speak at society luncheons and in student conferences. Few true prophets can survive that sort of treatment for long. There is also, it must be admitted, very often a complexity within the socio-moral

problems of, say, modern western societies which almost defies prophetic treatment. The prophet can so often trip up his genuine message by succumbing to the simplistic. The same, of course, is true of the more 'liberal' Church. A really reactionary church is good ground for effective prophecy, but you have to be a very cool but powerful prophet indeed to get under the skin of a progressive Church, and smug in its progressiveness.

The second question is: how at the time can you tell a true prophet from a false, or a prophet from a sincere teacher or whatever? The answer is, of course, that there is no sure way of telling. On the whole, if a man is hailed enthusiastically by his contemporaries as a prophet, then he probably isn't one. A prophet is a sour fellow whom the ecclesiastics don't like and the media don't like and, probably, the general public doesn't like. No more the government. The trendy theological publishers, like SCM, probably don't publish him. And yet, of course, somehow his message does get through, so someone has published him. He may have his 'school', but not too big or comfortable a one. Prophecy does not monopolise truth. There are lots of truthful teachers, priests and bishops who aren't prophets. Popes too. Are some popes prophets all the same? It's not impossible: was Pope John XXIII a prophet? After all, God can locate his word in the most improbable of places, and if institutionally the papacy is the least likely place to find a prophet, spiritually it is the most desirable. Pope John challenged the Church and the world quite unexpectedly - most probably in ways that he really did not expect and could not explain himself. He was hardly by temperament a prophet, and yet his word came to his contemporaries with a quite amazing personal authority - really much beyond the authority even a Pope can claim. His own Church has never quite forgiven him for doing so.

Clearly, the better the Church is functioning, the more prophetic it is as a whole. The more that is so, the more its leaders are speaking to the world really with the voice of Christ, the less need there is for the individual, uninstitutional prophet to goad it on. The prophet must live what she preaches: somehow she is herself a living of the message, for it is no detached academic subject she offers, but a burning word which is burning herself up too. If the Church and its leadership are really burning up with the

message of the Cross which brings life, of the freeing of the poor, of the judgment of God upon the heartless and the legalistic, and if this is manifest in the Church's own life, then they are truly prophetic. *Deo Gratias*. But if the Church and its leadership, while with conscious sincerity preaching the Christian message, in fact confine their ministry of justice to the pronouncement of banal and opaque generalisations, while showing an unyielding preoccupation with institutional and sexual regulations, with the maintenance of an essentially secular power structure within the enforcement of law rather than the proclamation of the Gospel, then they are in no way being prophetic. *Miserere nobis*.

The prophetic gift of God's spirit is given in the Church both universally and locally. God cares for the whole but he also cares for every little part, so what has been said of the Church universal, is true for nation, town, local parish. He leads us, it may be said, in two ways. One way is that of the historic institution, the Canonical Scriptures, the apostolic succession of ministers, of Popes and bishops, of handed down creeds and liturgies and ministries. It is an absolutely necessary part of the Christian economy, linking us in every generation with the objectivities of the historic Church and Incarnation. Escape from that and you enter the most dangerous world of indefinable spirit, charism, enthusiasm, all the strange vagaries of inspired religiosity. No. The Scriptures and the visible Church, the interlocking web of their perennial teaching is a rock, an abiding norm. But it is not the whole way in which God leads either the individual or society. The other side of his caring is the unexpected, the charismatic, the prophetic. Grace leads the individual in ways which cannot be foretold. God responds anew to each new person and each new age of the Church - not with new revelation, but with new inspiration. Without this, the Church becomes as dead as an old dry bone. The spirit breathes anew in every age choosing what messenger she will, to challenge the age, to demonstrate in quite unexpected ways the relevance of the old gospel to new circumstances, new sins, new social disorders. The apostolic succession stands on one side, prophecy on the other. Sometimes the two roles are borne by the same person, more often by different people and even by people in conflict. The total guidance of God is not to be found in

one or the other alone, but in both, and even when they are in conflict. Neither the one nor the other can be ignored, though on occasion the one or the other must be defied - but defied still within one single, often agonised but still abiding communion of the Body of Christ.

In conclusion, let us think again of the relationship of prophecy to the 'sacred' and the 'religious'. The Christian is faced with two temptations - one is to be sacralised, the other to be secularised. If his heart, his concerns, his understanding of religion become preoccupied with religious things - ceremonies and church buildings and doctrinal orthodoxies and religious orders and papal visits - then he has succumbed to the first temptation. If her heart and her concerns become preoccupied with the problems of the contemporary world in such a way that she is seeing and judging according to the ideologies of the contemporary world - capitalism, liberalism, hedonism, Marxism, what you will - then she has succumbed to the second temptation. The power of prophecy, which is here at the very eye of Christian living, is to be concerned above all with the things of this world, but according to the mind of Christ. To manage this, we do indeed require the 'sacred': Scripture, Eucharist, prayer. Here is the fount of vision. Celebrating the 'memorial' of the man who freely chose to die and is forever alive, finding the very heart of meaning in something so seemingly absurd to the modern world as a ritual meal, repeating week after week, "This is the cup of my blood shed for you and for all", and finding it not a bore but unbelievably pregnant in power, we can be immersed in the secular without being secularised. The Eucharist is not dissipated by such a context; it transforms it. And it makes its participants different. It asserts a pattern of meaning throughout the rest of life, a programme of revolutionary priorities for human relations, which sets one both intellectually and socially at odds with the secular continuum. To belong or not to belong. To be wholly part of the world and yet to be intensely, painfully marginal, because the faith within one refuses to acquiesce in the rightness of standards of collective and individual selfishness, class war, nationalism or just a bored satisfaction with affluence.

The value of the 'religious life' in the old-fashioned sense (the life of vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience,



or some equivalent) found its principal Christian justification in freeing people for prophecy. The vows made them into marginalised people, delivered from many of the ordinary day-to-day obligations of life, and so able to throw themselves, as Christ - that most marginal of celibates - threw himself, into the challenging of the world for the sake of justice and mercy. Alas, time and again, 'religious life' has not freed people at all, but delivered them mind and body into the legalistic bonds of sacralised existence. Without deep piety - a sense of God and the need for grace and prayer - we cannot be prophets. Yet deep piety, Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox, is better than any other trap for removing us from the task of prophecy into the pseudo-religious world of a detached sacrality: a world all the worse for the ease with which it enters into alliance uncritically with the most reactionary status quo. Nothing should make someone a better prophet than monastic spirituality; in practice and generally speaking - at least until recently - nothing has removed people more effectively from the role of prophecy than monastic spirituality. Trevor Huddleston and many a Latin American Jesuit and Sisters Maura Clark, Ita Ford and Dorothy Kazel, and indeed lots of other Religious in recent years has shown that this is no longer true - that religious life is rediscovering its prophetic justification. Nothing more important may have happened within the Church during the last decade.

Paul of Tarsus, Catherine of Siena, Martin Luther, Simone Weil, Barbara Ward, Oscar Romero: whom are we to choose as Christian prophets par excellence? Everyone will make his or her own choice. There is no 'apostolic succession' of prophets, and no need to agree as to who was, who was not, a true prophet. Jesus Christ was, that is sure. And He suffered for it. His call for disciples is, above all, for men and women to take on the task of prophecy, its fierce intellectual honesty, its bearing of the burdens of the weak, its condition of marginality, its promise of unpopularity, its refusal to take refuge in the temple but its equal refusal to see the world through the spectacles of the world's own justifying ideologies. Such is the call. Who will hear it?

# Francis McHugh

## The Social Context of Prophecy

*"It is up to Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives of action from the social teaching of the Church."*

Pope Paul VI, in 'Octogesima Adveniens' No.4

### I. The Importance of Context

It is an axiom of literary criticism that a passage or text cannot be interpreted if it is taken out of its context. An ornithologist, asking his student to identify a singing skylark and hearing him mutter, "*Bird thou never wert*", might be excused for marking him down as in error. But the poet, knowing the preceding line, "*Hail to thee, blithe spirit*", and also those which follow, "*That from farthest heaven pourest forth thy heart*", would surely appreciate an exaggeration telling no more than the truth. The context, the parts which immediately precede and follow a



passage, determine its meaning: the isolated text has no clear message. It is the purpose of literary research to establish the historical and structural influences operating in the context in order to illumine the passage or book under review.

A similar uncertainty of meaning and purpose afflicts social institutions (for example, the mass media and the churches) or social processes (policy-making and Christian prophecy) which are inadequately or insufficiently related to their social context. In this respect, the position of the churches and Christian social groups is especially problematic: because they have emphasised that their role begins to exist precisely where two worlds intersect, there has been tension between invisible and visible elements in religious and church life and action, and a tendency - to put it no stronger than that - to highlight the invisible elements, thus rendering it less urgent for them to engage with human and historical reality. Another influence engendering neglect of the social context of the Christian mission was that school of biblical interpretation which refers Christian prophecy to the isolated and solitary relationship of individual to God. Working out of this framework, liberal theology postulated a prophetic quality essential to the Gospel message and, at the same time, gave that message a fixed and lasting identity in time and society, to the neglect of the social context in which its values had to be realised.<sup>1</sup> Noting only, for the moment, that a more complete study of social context of Christian prophecy would require close attention to the impact of *secularisation* and the withering away of *privatisation* in theology in order to understand how the Christian mission is now being seen as 'more worldly', one may begin from the reasonable assumption that the sharp dichotomies between 'sacred and secular', 'religious and political' and 'this world and the world-to-come' are no longer as imperious as they were. The other side of this coin is that the social context (economic, industrial, social and political) in which Christian prophecy is operative is more prominent. "Responsible theology must therefore engage in institutional criticism as it reflects on the 'place' of the churches 'in the life' of modern society, and in ideological criticism as it reflects on itself."<sup>2</sup>

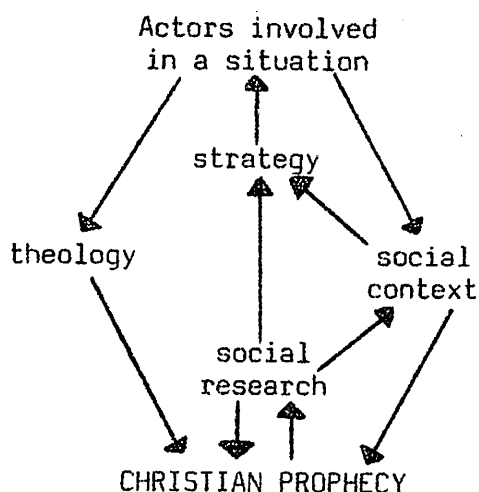
If Christian prophecy, which will be defined more carefully later, is to realise its values in history, the

historical and structural relationships of the society in which it is uttered, as well as its intended and unintended consequences, must be studied and analyzed. Social research has an essential part to play in the search for the social context of Christian prophecy.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that insight into the structure of society is given only to the methods of science, even more so to the kind of social research which has been accepted as legitimate within the British political system. This tradition, which has attracted social ethics<sup>3</sup> (where faith and social justice are usually linked), has four characteristics. Firstly, it places high value on what it calls being *scientific*. Secondly, it gives primacy to *quantification*. Thirdly, it relies on an *inter-disciplinary* approach to analysis and is not sensitive to frames of reference and perspectives proposed by theoretical study. Finally, it is oriented to the solution of problems. This kind of social research treats the context as no more than the great social machine, which 'scientific' method can adequately describe and propositions about which are subject entirely to empirical research. Both the conservative *functionalist*\* tradition and the recent radical Marxist understanding share with empirical social science a commitment to treat the social, and human beings, as things. The relationship of Christian prophecy to the social context is not that of a fixed and final utterance seeking only the arena described by social research in which to insert its message: *"Observed truth is a servant of moral truth and every man must secure as much of it as he needs and can use. But to regard the search for factual truth, whether in science or history, as an end in itself, to be pursued without regard to human ends and God's purposes, seems to me to be a great mistake... As an end in itself, it is no more (and no less) significant than, shall I say, stamp-collecting."*<sup>4</sup>

Another tradition in social science, that of Simmel and Weber, stresses the need to treat human beings as actors and as the creators of social existence, thereby providing an opening for social ethics and socio-theology to appropriate a more *reflexive* approach to social analysis. In connection with Christian prophecy, what this means is that the social context is not something 'out there' to be identified, studied and analyzed, and then to be '*socially engineered*' with a fully-formulated prophecy brought from the Gospel to

the social situation. Christian prophecy must be *contextual* at least in the sense that it is not only introduced into a context illumined by social research, but also that it responds and adapts to changes which it has, itself, helped to create. In terms of theory, a reflexive sociology implies a reflexive Christian prophecy. In practical terms it means, in regard to method, that there is not simply a one-way influence from Christian prophecy to the social context, but rather a two-way movement: Christian prophecy influences the social context and is, in its turn, influenced by it. The elements of interaction and feedback are crucial. A model of the process would be something like this:



## II. Defining Christian Prophecy

This explanation of the relationship of social research, actors and the social context carries certain lessons for the definition of Christian prophecy. It means, for instance, that prophecy is not a settled, eternal formula, but is responsive to historical situations and acquires meanings when it is in operation. It has both *archaeological* and *teleological*\* dimension. By virtue of the former Christian prophecy is forced to include criticism of structures inherited from the past: *"So the first task of a prophetic and evangelical Church is to analyse the social*

structures of the world in which it has its being and find the sinful dimensions in them that have been taking shape through the evil inheritance of the past. Logically, this requires that those who proclaim the Gospel must hold a definite social, economic and political outlook. The Gospel cannot be indifferent to the structural reality of society, but must be proclaimed directly in relation to 'redemption' from the sin that vitiates structures."<sup>5</sup>

In virtue of its teleological dimension, Christian prophecy, in using social research, must also include consideration of intended and unintended consequences of its interventions. At this point it will connect up with much that has been written on the theme of hope in the political theology of Moltmann and Metz. Christian prophecy, in the setting of its social context, is rather in the nature of a 'symbol', as interpreted by Ricoeur: it is retrospective, deriving power from tradition, and prospective, sustained by hope of contributing to the future.<sup>6</sup> The form of the struggle is aptly summed up in a couplet from Milton:

*"Till old experience do attain  
to something like prophetic strain."*

### III. Identifying the Social Context:

#### Christian prophecy and what?

Up to this point, two questions have been considered: first, that Christian prophecy can have meaning and force only in a social context which has been thoroughly analyzed and understood; and, second, how, by the encounter of Christian values and social realities, prophecy becomes an effective symbol. There remains the problem of identifying what are the actual social context or contexts in which Christian prophecy must resound. In his essay, 'Religion and what?', Stephen Yeo, after paying tribute to R.H. Tawney's perceptiveness in singling out 'the rise of capitalism' as the proper social context for Christian critique and prophetic judgment in the 1920s, claims that in our time, "we need, collectively, to know or rather make, an alternative."<sup>7</sup> The word, 'collectively', suggests the need to find some practical way of arriving at consensus, between the skills of sociologists, historians, technicians, practitioners, and the Christian insights of those who are concerned to

articulate the prophecy. As it happens, there is evidence in the documents and programmes of churches and Christian groups in Britain that a reliable consensus has already been reached on what the social context of Christian prophecy is. It is noticeable that Christian churches and groups in Britain have, in the 1960s and 1970s exhibited a growing interest in the nature and extent of their social and political responsibilities. This is true both at the level of formal church organizations (Boards of Social Responsibility, Church Social Committees) and also at the level of less official Christian social study centres and action groups. A 1981 survey of 130 such organizations and groups gives strong evidence of a collective search conducted by people with professional skills and others with Christian theological insight to find social understanding of the world to which prophecy must be addressed. There seems to be a widespread agreement amongst these Christian institutions and groups that the social context must be viewed in two ways: firstly, at a general level, and, secondly, in specific sectors or as specific social problems. At the general level, the fundamental social context challenging the contemporary church or the prophetic voice is still, in Britain, capitalism, industrial capitalism or changing forms of capitalist organization. In 1926, Tawney wrote 'Religion and the Rise of Capitalism'; in 1952 Canon Demant contributed to the discussion with his 'Religion and the Decline of Capitalism'; interest in the subject has recently been revived by Canon Preston's 'Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism'.<sup>8</sup> At the particular level, there is consensus about sectors and issues which constitute the social contexts of focussed Christian prophecy:

- industry and unemployment
- violence, peace and war
- urbanisation and inner-city problems
- race and community relations
- the place of women in church and society
- health and healing
- the political process, the welfare state.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. Christian Prophecy in Actual Social Contexts

##### (1) The general social context: capitalism

There is, it seems, a measure of agreement that the continuing capitalist system as the fundamental social context of Western economic life includes features calling for Christian prophetic judgment. The discussion, however, cannot get far if we stick to the simple label, 'capitalism', as the Western system of production, exchange and distribution. Neither will the simple title, 'Christian prophecy and capitalism', lead to a constructive position on Christian engagement in public affairs. Prophecy must wait on Christian critique; and Christian critique of Western society is complex, since complexity is the characteristic of contemporary capitalism. A start on a more nuanced understanding of the capitalist context may be made from a distinction drawn by Max Weber between capitalism itself as a specific mode of organization of the economic process, on the one hand, and the spirit of capitalism, the ruling motives and objectives of its leaders (the business-men) on the other. It is possible to isolate features of capitalism as organization and as a system of human relations and economic conduct to which Christian prophecy may be directed.

##### Capitalism as organization

Fundamental to Marx's analysis of capitalism was the idea of the separation of mental and manual labour or, as Braverman calls it, of conception and execution.<sup>10</sup> What this has meant in practice is that a small group of people do the research, design and development (creative work), while the mass of workers carry out their directions. The epitome of the theory which accepted this view of the work process was the 'scientific management' of Frederick Winslow Taylor who once said, "In my system the workman is told precisely what he is to do and how he is to do it, and any improvement he makes upon the instructions given him is fatal to success."<sup>11</sup> Recent technological developments in automation and computerisation have given rise to the widespread belief that workers will be freed from dehumanising manual labour and released to engage in creative work. On the other side, there is the argument that it is the machine that matters and that human beings have to be selected for

their suitability to the machine and trained to adapt to it. What this means is that the computer will be used to introduce *Taylorism* into intellectual work.<sup>12</sup> Underlying this view of the work process under capitalism is the claim that the object (that into which we incorporate our effort and labour) dominates the system of production and that *subjectivity* (the efforts and responses of the human agents) is destroyed. In terms of the organization, the occupational structure and the movement of labour follows the laws of capital.

Social research, looking at the context of contemporary capitalism, may conclude that the worker has conferred 'life' on the machine, and that the more one gives to the machine, the less there is left for oneself. Recent writings on alienation can be couched in these terms. Christian prophecy, facing this social context, should insist that, *"The beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person. Every man has the right to work, to a chance to develop his personality in the exercise of his occupation, to equitable remuneration which will enable him and his family to lead a worthy life on the material, social, cultural and spiritual level and to assistance in case of need arising from sickness or age."*<sup>13</sup>

The central aphorism of Christian prophecy, in its drive for the humanisation of work, is that, in some sense, 'the workers must work for themselves'. The absence of that feeling, because they are appendages to machines, or alienated from the product of their labour, or because, in a large capitalist enterprise, workers feel that their efforts are devoted to making a profit for the owners of capital, must be central to Christian prophecy in a sound theology of work. Two recent documents, one Anglican and the other Roman Catholic, *'Winters of Discontent'* and *'Laborem Exercens'*, illustrate how such Christian prophecy may be enshrined in an outline for a participatory structure of productive society.<sup>14</sup>

As well as mapping out its general nature in volume 1 of *'Capital'* and the *Grundrisse*, Marx was also careful to describe the development of capitalism in terms of periods. It has to be broken down into phases of development ('*epochs*', as Mandel calls them). In determining the fundamental social context for Christian prophecy, the specific features of the contemporary epoch must be diagnosed. As



established by scientific and technological revolution, three epochs of capitalism can be distinguished: the *hand-craft, manufacture* and the contemporary period which is distinguished by *machine production* of electronics and nuclear-powered apparatuses. There are aspects of both technology and capital in this micro-electronic epoch, as well as consequences of these structures, which must be prophetically challenged if Christian values are to be preserved. One feature has already been considered: the danger that intellectual work as well as manual labour will become dominated by the new technology, which is ubiquitous and acts primarily on the supply side of the economy. Then there is the *transnationalisation of capital* in this epoch, with its threats to the sorts of power basis which lesser political and industrial groups had built for themselves. For example the working class in Britain, as well as in other parts of Europe, has resisted the dictates of private capital accumulation and has been able to use the State in its defence; but multinational operations (to say nothing of the policies of the present Conservative government) constitute a threat to forms of political and social self-defence.

Christian prophecy, drawing on principles of social justice for its insight has something special to address to contemporary capitalism and the structural features and consequences referred to. In his lectures on capitalism and Christianity, Emil Brunner argues that the State and larger bodies (and many transnational companies are now richer and more powerful than some States) must do only what "*less comprehensive unities, the family, the parish, the industrial unions etc., are either unwilling or not in a position to do for the interests of the whole society. Everything which free groups, anterior to the state, can do, ought to be done by them, and not by the State.*"<sup>15</sup> In social philosophy, (on which Christian prophecy must also draw) this is referred to as the *principle of subsidiarity*, which claims that it is wrong for a higher association to take upon itself the task of doing things which can be done efficiently by smaller and lower societies.<sup>16</sup> People must never lose sight of the fact that social systems and all social arrangements exist to enable them to develop by helping each other to develop. Christian prophecy, working partly from this principle, must challenge aspects of capitalism to do with the state, multinationals, nuclear war and, at the level of international

trade, industrial adaptation versus protectionism.

### The Spirit of Capitalism

Weber's central thesis in 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' was that Western 'rational' capitalism as we know it could not have arisen without the support and sanction of certain religious doctrines peculiar to the 'ascetic' forms of Protestantism, of which the most important was Calvinism, with its doctrines of predestination and calling. This Protestant ethic resulted, at least in the entrepreneurial class, in dedicated pursuit of wealth through unremitting industry, rigid control of personal expenditure and concentration of time and attention on the pursuit of one's business affairs. In recent times attempts have been made to develop a system of business ethics, and in view of the increasing number of academic courses, conferences and experimental curricula on Business Ethics, an agenda for prophets should include study of the business context in which the leaders of business are attempting to correct consequences of the Protestant ethic in the light of human, sometimes even Christian, values. The trouble is that the various traditions of moral philosophy, social ethics and Christian prophecy have concentrated on individual and political morality, partly because of a disdain for market relationships and partly because the significance of middle-agencies has only come under close scrutiny since the rise of the multi-nationals. If Christian prophecy is to take the social context seriously, it must look beyond moral theories of psychological egoism, ethical egoism, utilitarianism and contract theories, and seek a more responsive theory of 'moral structures' than is offered in any of these traditions. Christian prophecy must look for bridging concepts, *axiomata media*, between individual agents and organizational agencies.<sup>17</sup>

To summarise: the social context of capitalism is described by Marx in terms of three forms of *rationalisation*\*:

- the rationalisation of the world
- the rationalisation of human action
- the rationalisation of inter-human conduct.

Something of the details of how this works out in an actual phase of capitalism has been given: Christian prophecy must contend with the details of the social reality.

## (2) Particular Social Contexts

Space does not allow for any detailed discussion of all the particular social contexts which urgently call for Christian prophetic judgment in Britain in the 1980s. Indeed, it is not even possible to deal with any one social issue at all its stages. One issue, race and community relations, is selected as a model; and the characteristic features of the response of Christian prophecy are highlighted to serve as some guide to thought, statement and action in other fields.

### Race and Community Relations

The first thing to notice is that the churches and Christian groups were slow to respond. The issue of race and the problems connected with a multi-racial society were not something completely new to Britain after the Second World War. There had been a centuries-old experience of heavy immigration into this country. But even the response to the large numbers of black immigrants arriving on these shores in the 1950s was slow. This slowness is the consequence of a lack of serious understanding of the policy process on the part of the churches and Christian groups. If the social context is to be taken seriously, churches and Christian groups must set up policy issues committees in order that they may have some influence on the future of public policy and lay the foundations of Christian hope. But once there was awareness of the social issue, interested bodies did investigate thoroughly the social context of the problem and did not present prophecy as simply an appeal to treat all God's children equally. Recently, *'A statement by the British Council of Churches' Working Party on Britain as a Multi-Racial Society* identified the true social context: *"The basic issue is not a problem caused by black people: the basic issue concerns the nature of British society as a whole, and features of that society which have been there long before the recent phase of black immigration."*

Realising the importance of the social context, Christian interests have researched various forms of institutional discrimination against the black population. This has been extended to include detailed study of government legislation which put the churches and Christian groups in a position to take a strong public stand on the Nationality Bill which is currently before Parliament.

Understanding the social context of Christian prophecy is not just a matter of having a realistic grasp of the social situation to which the Christian voice is directed, but also of identifying the agencies in the social context with whom *alliance* must be made. Two dimensions of race relations work in British churches and Christian groups offer models for the study of Christian prophecy and its social context: the ecumenical nature of Christian effort and the close cooperation with secular agencies. The churches work closely with each other, in an effort coordinated by the British Council of Churches; and, on the secular side, they connect up with the Commission for Racial Equality, the Action Groups on Immigration and Nationality, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, and even with the more radical 'Race Today'.

#### IV. Conclusion

The treatment of Christian prophecy in this essay has emphasised the necessity of research and analysis of the social context, since no theology or accepted philosophy can provide in advance an understanding of the human situation which Christian values seek to influence. Furthermore, social research may reveal social divisions, inequalities and human deprivations which, themselves, must be the objects of Christian concern, and which, indeed, may be the latent sources of Christian inadequacy. There are human divisions which need healing before ecclesiastical divisions; and ecumenical effort is required on social inequalities which can be more divisive than doctrinal ones. Without arguing that exhaustive study of the social context can become a complete guide to Christian prophecy, so that one would collapse into the other, it has been maintained that such prophecy acquires its meanings in the hands of Christians engaged with the human situation. The characterisation of the social context and theological reflection on it cannot be separated. It is at this point that Christian prophecy connects up with political theology and its current attempts to escape from a purely theoretical critical theology and to base itself on some definition of the primacy of *praxis*.<sup>18</sup>

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## Glossary

*Functionalism* - a school of sociology, represented by people like Durkheim and Parsons, which focusses on how systems work in respect of the relationship of the parts to the whole and of the whole to the parts. In operation, it emphasises the mechanistic, and in results it promotes the conservative.

*Rationalisation* - the dominance of production, human action, and human relationships by technology, and the alienative characteristics of modern capitalism, stemming from its class character.

*Teleological* - stemming from a theory which looks to the end or outcome of action; present choice as governed by future end. In the present context, this connects up with the element of hope in Christian prophecy: hope for the future.



Colin Winter

## The Style and Content of Modern Prophecy

First of all, let's be honest: who do we think we are kidding? Who cares a damn about 'the style and content of modern prophecy' in Toxteth, Brixton, Belfast, Birmingham, Bradford, Manchester, the Maze Prison, among those on the dole queues throughout the United Kingdom, or the 'prisoners' in the high rise tenements on desolate housing estates, or among the unemployed black or white youth hanging round job centres and city centres, or the old age pensioners facing hunger and hypothermia this winter, or the three million or more workers faced with continuing unemployment and redundancy - a life of nothing, going nowhere - or the single parent, or the people, often political victims, herded into our overcrowded prisons - all exploited by a cruel, capitalist society?

Do prophets exist today, are there any to be found in the churches? Or do the churches generally reflect the aspect of the middle class, uncaring society, good with individual problems, but lousy with the big issues of unemployment, nuclear disarmament and liberation movements?

Where would we see the voice of prophecy being expressed? Could it be expressed through the actions of those

black and white kids who were demonstrating in our cities, who were rioting against the standards of a society we have tolerated for too long, yes, who were throwing the stones and the milk bottles full of petrol, who were declaring through actions, not words or manifestos, what they think of the present moral decay of this British nation? What is it that forces the prophet to speak out? "The sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that fill the prophets of Israel with dismay, do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as typical ingredients of social dynamics. To us a single act of injustice - cheating in business, exploitation of the poor - is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a death blow to existence: to us an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world."<sup>1</sup>

So how are we to regard these young people on the streets, protesting with stones and with petrol bombs against our society? Do we dismiss them as 'the mad bomber' element in our society, or are they to be regarded as our judges, the yardstick by which God is measuring us and finding our society corrupt, rotten, lacking in justice?

"Now the days of reckoning have come,  
The days of reprisal are here.

'The prophet is mad', Israel protests.

'This inspired fellow is raving'.

- Ah, yes, but only because your iniquity is so great,  
Your apostasy so grave". (Hosea 9:7)

"The main task of prophetic thinking is to bring the world into divine focus..." writes Heschel, and again, "God's role is not spectatorship, but involvement."<sup>2</sup> Just how did God get 'involved', and on whose behalf? Flick through the pages of the Old and New Testaments among the writings of the prophets and the actions of Jesus. God always gets involved in the cause of the struggling oppressed masses or individuals. Those we call today the masses, the proletariat, were the ones whose cause he took up in Egypt, releasing them from the bondage of slavery, the contract labourers who slaved on the pyramids under the bondage of Pharaoh, to them he was the God who liberates. Then we go on through the Bible and we see the loving compassionate concern of almighty God for lepers, widows, orphans, the destitute unemployed, foreigners, the starving, the ripped off,



the single parent, the prostitute, the marginalised, all sorts of prisoners, and the mentally sick.

Contrariwise, God stands out and opposes royalty, the callous, money-grubbing rich, the bankers who ripped off the poor, tyrants of all descriptions, exploiters, religious hypocrites, priest-dominated worship, church party politicians. He stood out against the idolizing of money, that is, making money the main object and objective of one's life. Jesus has hard words to say to the rich, "You cannot serve God and Mammon" - but the church has often confused us by keeping 'mammon' in where 'money' is really meant. Again Jesus summarises the whole intention behind his prophetic ministry, "Go and learn the meaning of the words: 'What I want is mercy (= justice), not sacrifice'" (Matt.9:13).

"The witness Jesus gave is the same as the spirit of prophecy" (Rev.19:10). "'Those who maintain testimony to Jesus' and are inspired to do so via the spirit of prophecy, ideally include all Christian people." <sup>3</sup> For Lampe, "the witnessing Christian is an inspired prophet" <sup>4</sup>, and the New Testament calls us all to this task. "If we hold firm, then we shall reign with him. If we disown him, then he will disown us" (II Tim.2:12).

But Jesus also spoke about false prophets and these too exist, so how are we to judge between the true and the false? The criterion for our judgment is to be the fruits which the prophets show in their commitment to justice and the oppressed and, above all, whether or not they testify to Christ.

It is in this role that the churches in England come off appallingly badly. In 1978, £200,000 a year was promised by the Church of England's Board of Social Responsibility to help the poor, the underprivileged, the marginalized, the neglected in our inner cities. This was a good, a brave and a sensible gesture. But, after two years, only £28,000 of that money has been raised. Only eight of the forty-three English dioceses met their target. "You will be able to tell them by their fruits" (Matt.7:16). Added to this is the fact that the white church is more and more abandoning the poor in the ghettos of our inner cities, and is flourishing among the middle classes in the green belts. The cry of the poor is the voice of God in agony in our midst. It is certainly true that the young people in their protests are drawing attention to their sufferings. They



are crying out for compassion and for understanding. To me also they seem to be crying out for a society that will care about them and listen to them.

"The living proletariat knows only one affliction, isolation, and cries out for one thing, community...they are seeking something more intensely than the bourgeoisie ever did."<sup>5</sup> These words were written by a 21-year-old student who later struggled against the forces of Nazism. His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He adds an imperative: "The Gospel must deal with the present - and that means at this moment the proletarian mass - IN A CONCRETE WAY."<sup>6</sup> This was the task of the Church as Bonhoeffer saw it for his generation. It is no less our task today. He goes on to affirm, "The Church of the future will not be bourgeois. We cannot tell what it will look like."<sup>7</sup> And he ends with a final directive: "Even if the confrontation and the discussion are hard, the church must dare to take this step into the life of the proletariat, the masses."<sup>8</sup> But the white churches in this country, dragged down as they are by middle-class attitudes, and holding back nervously from what they term 'politics', are hardly able to meet the challenge. It is difficult to see the establishment of the church giving a lead in social reforms so badly needed in our society. The church has become the great Houdini of the 20th century - dodging all the main issues and offering in their place the pomp and circumstance of its great cathedrals, the bowing and scraping before the monarchy, the substitution of big royal weddings for a positive, compassionate stand with the poor. The church neither understands nor proclaims its prophetic role in society today. What ought the churches to be doing if they are to fulfil this prophetic role?

"Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums... What if somewhere in ancient Palestine poor people have not been treated properly by the rich... Why such immoderate excitement? Why such intense indignation? The prophet's words are outbursts of violent emotions. His rebuke is harsh and relentless. But if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?... Prophecy is a voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and

man. GOD IS RAGING IN THE PROPHET'S WORDS."<sup>9</sup> There is no room here for those middle-class Christians who want a Christianity that is composed of marshmallows.

Yet, among the silence of the churches, Christians can still go on hoping. Individual prophets will continue to be raised up from within the church, from without the church, from ordinary people - from people who are not Christians, but who are prophets nevertheless, because they are speaking inspired words on behalf of suffering humanity. "*The spirit moves where it listeth*" (John 3:8). The next thing to be noticed is that you can never silence the true prophet. He is not only prepared to proclaim his message - he is prepared to die for it. The prophet is the thinker, the architect, the conscience of a new society which can be created and must be created, if we are to fulfil the command of Jesus, "*Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.*" This is not pious utopianism, this is the task that all Christians are committed to at baptism. This is what commits us all to be prophets of the living God. Pious attitudes, participation in planned giving campaigns, all the clap-trap that now surrounds religion in the United Kingdom is really evading the main challenge. Christians claim to know God, to love God and to serve God. What does it mean to know God? It means to know one who rules "with kindness, justice and integrity on earth; yes, these are what please me - it is Yahweh who speaks" (Jer.9:23-4).

So what holds the white churches in Britain back from embodying prophecy? Privilege, class, riches, comfort, snobbery. All Christians in Britain today live in a class-divided society. Truly to be converted must mean, in our context, to be liberated from class, pride, arrogance, and the alienation that is caused by wealth.

"Unless theology finds a way to overcome class captivity, it cannot expect to render a true service to the 'whole people of God', either within the Churches or in the wider social body."<sup>10</sup> If the role of prophecy is to bring the world into focus then this is surely what Christians in our present society must be doing. Those Christians who are alienated from the suffering, struggling poor, are alienated from Jesus himself. Jesus did not talk, he took action! He took up the cause of the struggling poor to such a degree that he actually identified them with himself: "*I was*



*hungry... I was thirsty... I was a stranger... naked... sick ... in prison"*(Matt.25:35-36). There are false prophets. Among them must be listed the fundamentalists and the so-called charismatic movement. For the most part this movement keeps its members aloof from the struggle of the black and white suffering masses for justice and for a decent society. As Christians they are obsessed with their own particular problems, preoccupations, personality difficulties - so that instead of Christianity being involved in the struggle for liberation with the oppressed, they have turned it into a religious lonely hearts club, a hideaway from society's agonies and challenges, a communal security blanket, where you can be loved and accepted, but rarely challenged with life's real problems, except upon a mutually agreed basis. Yes, there are lonely people, including many Christians, who need care and love. Yes, Christian worship does need a shake-up in Britain, but all this is not enough in itself. Christian prophecy is concerned with bringing the real world into divine focus. With the terrible threat of global annihilation hanging over us, with the acceptance of the unemployment of countless millions in this country, with the starvation of the world's poor, Christians cannot afford the luxury of self-indulgence. We cannot turn in on ourselves and become a happy-valley ghetto. Religious escapism is as insidious as any other form of escapism, such as alcoholism or drug addiction. So the Christian of today must be seen as the prophets of old were seen, as a disturber of society, as one who constantly pursues interpersonal justice. To seek a religion of comfort and security only succeeds in alienating Christians, more and more, from the mass of black and white struggling workers who are unemployed in our society. Christians can no longer seek a solely Christian solution to the problems that surround us. We can no longer scorn political involvement as a contamination of pure faith. We can rightly claim that we have seen the liberating aspects of God's enduring love in the face of a crucified Galilean peasant whom the rich and the powerful had to murder because they could never silence him.

So today, Christians can learn from the faces of the struggling, articulating poor in Latin America, Africa and elsewhere in their determined and unquenchable search for justice in a new world.

Hope should be the characteristic of the Christian. Many today believe that a new inspired Christianity is being forged and refined in such countries as Brazil, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Angola, Mocambique, South Africa. They further believe that here are arising modern day prophets - not voices crying out in a wilderness, but rooted in the masses, with one hundred thousand base communities in Brazil alone. These Christians have one thing in common, they are poor and they are oppressed, but *they are our liberators*. So how should we hear them? and how should we respond?

*"The word was made flesh, he lived among us"*. Jesus did not just talk about oppression, he entered the world of the oppressed. He lived as an oppressed person with oppressed people. Modern Christians must seek to do the same. They must seek solidarity in the struggle of those who are looking for new hope in a new world which will be based on justice. As Christians we are committed to action: *"Go, and do the same yourself"* (Luke 10:37). The new prophets in our midst are such people as Dom Helder Camara, the assassinated Archbishop Romero, Nelson Mandela, Herman ya Itoivo, the million articulate refugees from the oppression of Chile, and many more. The establishment, such as the Reverend Edward Norman, fears them as part of the communist world's take-over bid. The establishment ignores them and hopes that they will go away, dismissing their theology as naive, non-biblical, non-professional. The religious bigots in the time of Jesus dismissed him in the same way: *"Whence has this man knowledge?"* (Mark 6:2). The squalor and dehumanisation under which the majority of these Christians in the Third World live force them to look to two places for alternatives. They look to the Bible and to the teaching of Karl Marx.

They broke with the Christianity which spoke of heaven in terms of an after-life. They sought a scientific explanation for the poverty which dehumanised them. Aided by priests, church workers and by political theorists, they were able to examine the capitalist society which supported their exploitative governments. They were able to examine the nature of the multi-nationals who paid them slave wages. They were able to understand why money was being spent on tanks, bombs and guns from such countries as America to hold them captives in their society. They were coming face to face with the appalling conditions which capitalism forced

on them. How as Christians could you deal with all this? - Could you change it, could you humanize it, could you improve it, could you make it more merciful? - All these ways had been tried but the oppression intensified and the people's poverty grew worse. They looked to the Bible to see what God had to say about poverty and its causes, they were able to discuss these in practical terms which affected their position as they existed on the periphery of modern cities. They were fed with propaganda about industrialisation going to bring utopian dreams for the poor. Christianity could take them so far in diagnosing the root causes of injustice but they also needed the political analysis of experts, those who would make no claims to being Christians. A failure on the part of the church to listen, to learn and to adapt to these political insights led to stagnation, irrelevance and obscurantism. For example, in the West the Church had begun, in the teaching of the Fathers, by condemning usury and property. It ended up by allying itself to the capitalist system which idolises both. In Latin America the political and religious learning process was initiated after Vatican II whose reforms are aimed at freeing the church from the clogged-up machinery and musty accretions of the past. But once a reform process is started, it cannot be checked. It was not just a question of substituting local languages in the place of ancient Latin or of allowing lay persons fuller participation in church services. Christians were also examining the very structures of their own society and were forced by the conditions that faced them to look for political answers to solve the problems of peasants and poor urban workers. It was no good relying solely on prayers and reciting endless 'Our Fathers' and 'Hail Marys', if contaminated water, open sewers, wretched shanties, and tenements, spored cholera, and endlessly high infant mortality rates were killing those around you. Christians were discovering the real world with all its problems, they were discovering too its heroes, its villains, its saints and its martyrs. They also discovered Karl Marx.

It is true that Marx has many religious detractors in the West who reject him on the grounds of his alleged atheism. Yet, in his magnificent work, 'Marx against the Marxists', Jose Miranda puts together a strong case that Marx's attack on religion was not an attack on Christianity. Jesus distinguished between the religious hypocrisy of his

day and the true faith built on justice, sharing and brotherhood which God demanded of his followers. As Miranda puts it, "Marx's attack on religion has frequently been interpreted as an attack on Christianity. But Christianity is not a religion... The God of the Bible is incompatible with religion, and... Jesus Christ not only stressed this unmistakable trait of Yahweh, but also expressly attacked the cultic worship and the Temple that were allegedly dedicated to the true God. Strictly speaking one can say that the interpretation of Christianity as a religion has been the most radical falsification ever perpetrated in history."<sup>11</sup> Surely what Miranda is expounding is simply this: that religion has always captivated the people; it has made its concordats with generals and dictators, it has been supported by and has supported the rich and the powerful. Its leaders have become princes and potentates, more at home with the rich than with the poor. The churches in Western Europe and North America have so identified with capitalism that they themselves have become big business, whose combined assets equal a major multi-national's. A religion which is enslaved by money and by power is rejected by almighty God - this is the clear message of the prophets and of Jesus. It was this collusion which Marx was attacking in religion: but not the revolutionary message of Jesus, the poor man from Nazareth.

It is undeniable that the life style of the early church which entailed the holding of all things in common, indicates that a new revolutionary society was actually conceived and was being lived out as part of the expression of God's kingdom on earth. Christians often say that the communism as described in the Acts of Apostles was tested and then rejected, and so dismiss modern communism. But we must do more than make this superficial evasion: we must ask ourselves why this social revolution, which was the natural outflowing application of Jesus' teaching, failed.

"The communist effort of the primitive Christian community (Acts 2:44; 4:32) did fail. However, the fact does not strip the primitive communism of the early church of its normative character vis-a-vis the essence of Christianity. Instead, we must ask ourselves why it failed and eradicate the causes for that failure. According to Marx, it failed because the primitive Christians neglected the political struggle. In the midst of a world based upon commodity

production and private property, an isolated community cannot avoid the penetrating influence of money and anti-communist factors. Centuries later, Christians would betray the cause by asserting that the elimination of private property is not an obligation but a way to higher perfection. Today that felonious 'interpretation' is still being taught; while it claims to adore Jesus Christ as God, it actually stabs him in the back. This is the only way to keep the Gospel message from revolutionising the world."<sup>12</sup>

Jesus asked: "Surely life means more than food, and the body more than clothing?" He referred to the birds, "Are you not worth much more than they are?" (Matt.6:25-6). He also made subversive statements against religious practises: "The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Jesus placed men and women above things. In so doing he was articulating the very essence of humanism which Karl Marx describes. The whole of Marx's economic message revolted against capitalism because, in the capitalist system, "the process of production has the mastery over man instead of being controlled by him."<sup>13</sup>

So workers are dehumanised in capitalist production - they have become mere means of production, not an end in themselves and not the aim of production. It is from Jesus Christ that the West learns that a human being is an end in herself and the rest of the world learnt it from the West. Marx's distinguished contribution is to add that our subjugation to the work of our own hands is even more true in the capitalist mode of production than in religion. The question that Christians have to ask themselves today is: How can we stop a system where profit and money control our destiny, subjugate masses, condemn millions to unemployment and misery, exploit the people and the minerals of the Third World and get away with all this by massive investment in military hardware? The prophets protested and went on protesting; so must we.

Jesus anticipated our problem. We must now choose between authentic Christianity and bogus false religion. If as Christians we are to follow the message of Jesus, and to choose authentic Christianity, we will also have to accept its political and socio-economic consequences. Money in Western society has been made the supreme God - this is blasphemy and totally contrary to the teachings of Christ, "You cannot be the servant both of God and of money" (Mt.6:24).



Marx says as much too. The Bible speaks of making an idol of gold - so too does Marx. *"Let us get back to the origin of capitalism. It is in its role as God, as Mammon, as a false deity, that money gives rise to capitalism."*<sup>14</sup> Marx is speaking in essentially Christian terms when he condemns the worship of mammon as desecrating humanity.

We are living through a period where a British prime minister, committed to monetarism, has willingly and blindly sacrificed three million people on the altar of mammon. We live in a world where money dominates the mind of politicians and where bankers and multi-national companies pull the strings and force governments to dance to their tune. Any wonder, then, that we feel we are witnessing The Great International Muppet Show, but as helpless spectators and by-standers, watching our own society destroyed and feeling totally inadequate to do anything about it. What can we do? The answer is: mobilise with those who are resisting and who are standing with the oppressed masses in our land. This means that the Christian in Britain must be a political activist, joining arms with those at grass-root level who are involved in the struggle of the masses for justice - let me hasten to add that I do not believe that this could be fulfilled by an alliance of parties which are mere regurgitated forms of capitalism.

As Christians, we live in a country; one of whose major industries is the exporting of weapons of destruction throughout the world. We belong to an extremely violent society. Yet there is a paradox here: church leaders in this country tirade against violence - most often the violence the oppressed show in resisting their oppressors. The Church of England condemned the grants made to assist the freedom fighters in the Programme to Combat Racism organised by the World Council of Churches. The Salvation Army has completely withdrawn from the W.C.C. because it says it is opposed too to the policies. There seems to be a deep-rooted hypocrisy here, because this nation has thrived on violence - the violence of the slave trade, the violence of colonialism, the violence of waging endless wars, which profited only the munition makers and the bankers, but saw the wanton slaughter of the young men of this country. The Church lectures the oppressed on how to behave - with hand on heart it tells them, 'Love your enemies'. By the use of such a word and by ignoring the sufferings of the masses of



of exploited people throughout the world, who are rising up against their oppressors, Western religion points a finger of condemnation. Just what does a theology of love entail?

*"A theology of love cannot afford to be sentimental. It cannot afford to preach edifying generalities about charity, while identifying 'peace' with mere established power and legalised violence against the oppressed. A theology of love cannot be allowed merely to serve the interests of the rich and powerful, justifying their wars, their violence and their bombs, while exhorting the poor and underprivileged to practise patience, meekness, long suffering, and to solve their problems, if at all, non-violently.*

*The theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world, and not merely to compromise with them... A theology of love may also conceivably turn out to be a theology of revolution. In any case, it is a theology of resistance, a refusal of the evil that reduces a brother to homicidal desperation."*<sup>15</sup>

As a young man, I watched in horror a news film which showed the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These two major Japanese cities, engulfed in a raging fire-ball, were almost totally obliterated. I emerged from the cinema shaken and ashamed. The rest of the English audience generally seemed to approve - after all, we had depicted the Japanese as less than human.<sup>16</sup> Today, we have H-bombs a thousand times more powerful which can destroy all the life on this planet. Yet there are many people, just like that English cinema audience, who just cannot grasp the significance or horrendous aspects of such weapons. Neither can my mind comprehend an amount of money such as \$180,000,000,000. This is what President Reagan wants to spend on 'defence'. (Notice how politicians abuse language: 'defence' = 'annihilation'!) The BBC banned the film 'The War Game': it was able to prevent Edward Thompson's lecture on nuclear disarmament, though he had been careful to apply it equally to both Eastern and Western Europe. Then there is the collusion of the capitalist press, which daily bombards us into believing that a neutron bomb war, with 'limited nuclear strike weapons', is a viable proposition which will contain a mythical Soviet attack with tank superiority. People throughout Western Europe are now mobilising to ban such weapons and to make a stand for peace. In Holland, the Christian churches both initiated and became totally

involved with others in the CND campaigns. Christians in this country should show a similar commitment.

Apathy, allied with political torpor, threaten the future of us all. We simply cannot afford to abandon world peace to reactionary politicians who are in league with the fat-cats in the arms trade. (40% of all American taxes are spent on the planning or production of arms and twelve American multi-nationals pocket all the profit - mind-blowing!) Recently nearly half a million people demonstrated in Bonn in protest against atomic annihilation. In this country the press and television gave the peace marchers hardly a mention. Leading scientists from the Soviet Union met with English and Scottish academics in Edinburgh to discuss seriously arms reduction. The event was cynically ignored. 'The Great Muppet Show' takes over again; but this time people are resisting. Throughout Europe they are mobilising against the placement of Cruise and Pershing missiles in their countries. Reagan, Haig, Schmidt, Thatcher and Nott - these insane, reckless puppeteers - are increasingly worried so a broadside of misinformation is unleashed to assure the people that what they envisage is just a 'teeny-weeny' neutron war. Limited theatre nuclear war is survivable! The propaganda aims at soothing us; for my part, it terrifies me. We had been fed lies over the past thirty years telling us we need atomic weapons to stop war. This was the rationale behind the so-called 'detente' policies. Now the argument has shifted: lies are nakedly exposed: 'John Wayne rules - O.K.?' 'We've got 'em, so let's use them against those pesky Russians'. Or if the words of President Truman are preferred, "We found the bomb and we used it."<sup>17</sup>

What must we do? - RESIST! (see E.P. Thompson's 'Protest and Survive'). But how? "Happy the peacemakers: they shall be called the sons/daughters of God"(Matt.5:9). On July 28th 1981, eight such peacemakers were gaoled in America to sentences of three to ten years imprisonment. They had entered the GEC missile plant and, with a hammer, destroyed the nose-cone of a rocket which later was to be filled with multiple warheads. These modern day prophets were all practising Christians, part of a group called 'The Ploughshare Eight'.<sup>18</sup> As they were led off to prison, they and their followers recited the Lord's Prayer and sang hymns. Philip Berrigan said quite simply, "We are willing to go to jail for our version of the truth,"<sup>19</sup> thus fulfilling both

in words and action St. Paul's saying, "We prove we are servants of God by great fortitude in times of suffering... when we are... sent to prison"(II Cor.6:3-10). Stephen asked pointedly, "Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted?"(Acts 7:52). Then how should we respond? - By understanding and accepting that commitment entails suffering. "I am a Christian and, therefore, a revolutionary." These words of Camillo Torres have a poignant significance for us today.

So what should we, who are committed by our vocation to be prophets and revolutionaries, now be doing? We should remind ourselves that God not only takes up the cause of the oppressed, whether they understand that or not. A Christian praxis of resistance means that such groups as SCM cannot remain on the periphery of life. We cannot go on talking to (mostly white) students alone. There are workers, shop stewards, single parents, all around you, working for you on the campus. Dialogue with them, join their meetings. Often these are the alienated in our society - discover them, listen, learn. Among the black ethnic groups you may at first be rejected - but not always. If you are, then *learn from it*. Perhaps for the first time in your life you are experiencing what millions of blacks have to face every day of their lives.

Political involvement is essential unless we turn our campus Christianity into spiritual isolationism - the Pharisees did just that - so too do the majority of fundamentalists, the right-wing 'born-again Christians', the so-called 'moral majority' who, in America, support and back every one of Reagan's discriminatory and jingoistic policies. British Christians are great on talk but weak on action. Yet a deep involvement in the Eucharist, prayer, Bible study, commits us to involvement with the struggling proletariat. So what does all this tell us about the nature of the true God of the Bible? Its portrait of God becomes abundantly clear. He is the God who acts on behalf of the oppressed, who suffers with the exploited, who takes up the cause of the weak, who befriends the alien, the orphan, the lonely, the bereaved. All of which is made beautifully clear for us in the story of the Good Samaritan. When Jesus finished telling it, he said to his listeners, "Go and do the same yourself"(Luke 10:37). This is nothing less than

a call for action and involvement in the real world.

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the importance of the Old Testament prophets for us today? Does the fact that they prophesied in a very different society affect their relevance?
2. Was the way of determining true prophets in Jewish society a good one (pp.19-20)? How should we do it today?
3. How did the Prophets' vision of the future affect their criticism of the present?
4. What sort of God did the Prophets see Yahweh as? What does the anger of Yahweh signify about him, and his relationship with Israel? How does Yahweh compare with Jesus' God?
5. Is it right to see the Old Testament prophets as predicting Jesus? In what sense were/are their prophecies fulfilled?
6. How much did Jesus see himself as being in the tradition of the OT prophets, and how much did he modify it?
7. What can we learn today from the way Jesus prophesied? Do you think Church teaching sufficiently emphasizes Jesus' role as a prophet? Is Jesus' attitude to the religious and political establishments of his time of any relevance to us now?
8. Can the Churches prophesy? Or only individuals, or small groups? Do churches inevitably reflect societies' injustices, or can they be beacons of righteousness in an unjust world? Do you agree with Colin Winter (p.69) that the Church can only prophesy if it is liberating itself from class-division?
9. What are today's 'moral priorities' in Britain (p.46)? Would you want to add any particular issues to those listed

by Francis McHugh(p.56)? What special contribution would Christians have to make in these areas?

10. Do you agree with Adrian Hastings(p.46) that it is more difficult to prophesy in a 'liberal society'? Are there any changes we could make in the Church or in our theology which would make it more possible to prophesy in such a society? Does the very idea of 'the liberal society' deserve prophetic criticism?

11. Do you agree with Francis McHugh(p.62) that "human divisions need healing more than ecclesiastical ones"? Do you think Christians have got the balance right?

12. "The Christian in Britain must be a political activist," writes Colin Winter. Do you agree?

13. Some of the writers speak of certain Christian practices such as the Eucharist and bible study as inherently prophetic in their significance. Are there any other aspects of Christian life which seem to you to be inherently prophetic?

14. Do you think there are prophets in Britain today? What is their message? Are they Christian? Why do you select them?

15. What are the signs of hope in the modern world that a prophet might seize on to show us the possibility of a new direction?

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